HIS DEAR UNINTENDED

J. BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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BY

J. BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

AUTHOR OF "FRAN," "LAHOMA," "AGNES OF THE BAD LANDS," ETC.

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TO

MY MOTHER

IN MEMORY OF

PLATTSBURG COLLEGE DAYS

The College walls are standing yet
  But broken is every glass.
Strange noises down the wide halls steal
  When idle breezes pass.

The tyrant bell is cobwebbed o'er—
  Its former serfs are free.
Would it might ring for them again
  Youth's opportunity!

Upstairs a door swings wide—you'd think
  A hand, long stilled, is there
Beck'ning the feet from vanished years
  Once more to chapel prayer.

That stain is where the old clock ticked
  The slow school-hours away;
How gladly was their gold exchanged
  For dross of idle play!

The door bangs—dear, familiar sound!
  Do footsteps cross the floor?
One half expects the song to rise
  From lips that will sing no more.

Past is not past in those speaking walls;
  You catch its faint perfume
When the shadows take their old, old shapes
  And the yellow roses bloom.

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I

No Study Is Hard if a Young Face Smiles Over the Top of Your Book

THAT night the beat of the rain and the clang of hammers roused such mad echoes from the rafters that the big door opened unheard. When the rush of warm damp air stopped our work at the anvils, she was already inside, the dusty door shut behind her, and the light from the swinging lantern showing her against the deep-red background as a black wedge of mystery, its white bit of laughing face challenging solution.

We were working so late to catch up with early summer orders that the opening of the horse-door would in any case have been surprising; but for a young girl to blow in at midnight made the surprise an Event. I don't know what Bill did, but I poised my hammer as if turned to stone while with all my eyes I tried to take her in—which I couldn't do, for all she was so slender.

She wore what amongst us men goes as a "slicker," though like-enough the name softens to French with change of sex—a long rubber water-proof with a tight neckband. Over her head was a covering of the same, held across her cheeks by her wet hand that nothing might be seen but eyes, nose and mouth.

For a full minute I left the talking to the driving rain, then asked, "Do I know you, young lady?"

"Nobody knows me," she gasped with an odd wrinkle of her little nose.

She might have said more—surely more was needful—if her breath hadn't altogether failed. With shoulder pressed against the doorpost, she panted hard to get it back again.

Laying down the hammer I asked, casual, hoping by due caution to lead her to the point she had shied from, "Do you want to speak to Bill? He's very busy."

I was firm but not unkind, for, on first meeting any woman, a man never knows what part she may play in his life.

"I've nothing to say to her," says Bill, red and defiant, for I'd kept him new and raw as to women, owing my own ease and boldness when

thrown among them to my dealings with his poor mother.

The white line of her face—so very white against the red door—was turned full upon Bill. I looked, also, and was glad to see him so big and clumsy, and to note how his natural good looks were disguised by grease and tar, and how his bared arms and shoulders and towsled hair were as a bulwark against any maid's fancy.

"But," she gave Bill, quick and decided, "I've something to say to *you,* Bill Attum!"—which made me turn with the queerest feeling to examine her; and when I caught the sparkle in her dark eyes, fear crept like a chill through my veins. And a thought was shaken down from the tree such as roots itself in every man's brain, reaching up into cloudy spaces. Here was the thought: that she had looked right through Bill's grime and patches to the gold in his lower stratum.

At her explosion he stared open-mouthed, and under her steady gaze I think he felt pleasure—an uncomfortable pleasure, to be sure, bringing his legs to his attention, but making him glad to be there.

I grew severe, for she was too pretty for half-way measures: "I judge you haven't a name?"

"At times—" she moved her shoulder toward me, but gave her eyes to Bill—"however, tonight I left it at home."

I couldn't help smiling at that, and there was a little laugh-shake in my voice as I said, "No use looking at Bill, then, for he carries his about with him, and a very good name, too, if I do say so myself. When he's of age he means to share it with a certain friend of mine who also has a name; and as he's nineteen now, I fear you've come too late!"

I nodded to Bill to blow up the fire, and as he stumbled only once getting to the bellows, I knew the night-wanderer had as yet done him no great harm. Hammering away, I tried to figure out which of our wild young set she might be—for in Mizzouryville the people are separated and marked in sets as distinct as the china in the grocery stores. Of course I know all the heads of families in town, but since my poor wife died—the only thing she'd done since our marriage, I take it, that she didn't want to do—my look and word were for only such women as had husbands—I mean, until the time now reached.

The little stranger said in a pleading tone that if we didn't mind she'd dry her hands at the fur-

nace; and when Bill saw her coming, the way he scurried to the farthest end of the shop must have pleased any father. As for dear life, he began hammering away, though I knew very well the life had gone out of his horseshoe.

Burying my bar amongst the glowing coals, I looked disapproval of any girl being out in rain and wind at midnight, no matter from what old settler descended; but without being discomposed, she pulled off her rubber hood, letting it hang down her back, the raindrops glistening in its folds. The furnace-glow smote her in the face, showing a great mass of brown hair that the hood had mussed up just enough to look natural; it was like finding a friend lingering in the hall after the rest of the company have called good-by from the gate—yet I was now sure I'd never seen her before.

With a quick step I put myself—and there's more than two hundred pounds of me—between that living picture and my boy. But I wasn't quick enough. Bill had caught sight of her face painted in rose tints by the dusky-edged flames; and against her long cloak, shimmering silver-like where the light spangled it, he could see her little hands seeming to melt smaller, while he

looked, like bits of snow in moonlight. And as straight as ever a man walked, he marched behind our petition-curtain to the water and towels.

I knew the sound he made was from taking the basin off its nail, but she, thinking it the creak of a back door, looked as disappointed as any child and gasped, "Oh! I've scared him clean away!"

"He'll come back cleaner," which she didn't understand till my words were illumined and embossed by as bright and handsome a young fellow's face as Mizzouryville had to show—and of other towns I know little.

She gave him a steady look which did the poor lad no good, then turned to me with, "Stick, you're so sorry I've come!" Now there was a grace and tenderness in her look and tone that touched my heart, not because she was right, perhaps, but because she was woman, though as to that I've had the feeling that sometimes it's right for a woman to be wrong. Of course I permit none but an old settler to call me by my first name, but I didn't draw into my shell. If a man's bearing can't speak louder than shirtsleeves and a leather apron, there's no use throwing "Mister" at strangers. But I gave her these words, very

clear-cut and rounded that she might catch them easily:

"I can't approve of eighteen-year-old girls streaking about the country with their names left at home; and while I'm as hospitable as the next man, I must say short that the rain that brought you here won't make you any wetter when it takes you away." And I fell to hammering with all my might, for I couldn't get all my meaning into mere words.

Bill called out, "She said she had something to say to me—well, I want to hear it."

She pointed her hand at him in a way to make him red and restive, and spoke with snap and push: "I don't want you to spend your life with an apron across your knees. I don't want you to be counted as just one more man in the village. I don't want you shoeing horses for other people to ride. The world needs the best that's in every one, and, Bill, you're not giving it your best."

She flashed her starry eyes as if to probe his depths, and just then she seemed bigger than Bill. He looked at me, furtive, but I wouldn't bear him a hand. I'd been hurt by her words but I thought they should be duly considered. Of course when

my time should come to sit on Old Settlers' Bench with my legs crossed and my mind free, I hoped Bill would be running the shop. Yet I had protested when he stopped school, though like-enough not strong enough, since it's hard to argue against one's interests. But this girl had a face that could have kept him to his books. The upward-drawing quality of it would have made the ghastliest chart in physiology a dream of rosy loveliness.

Seeing I'd deserted him, Bill did what he could alone: "I don't think any work's dishonorable. I got"—he was one of the slowest-speaking boys I ever knew—"tired of . . . school, and tired of . . . studying," he changed to his other leg, "and tired of . . . books."

"Tired!" She snatched the word from his mouth and flung it under her feet. But instead of stamping upon it, she walked back to the furnace, her way of moving her body saying, "But what's the use!"—which had more weight than a ton of oratory. And until I put the finishing touches to my job, she stood watching the dying embers as if she'd quite forgotten Bill—which had more weight with him than the other.

At my last blow she gave a little short laugh,

unwilling but gay enough. "Don't be angry with me, Stick." She sat down on an empty box with the faint glow still on her face. "The work's done and we're not sleepy, are we? and I hope not very *tired*." That was a fling at Bill, of course, and it hit him between the eyes, making him blink. "I'll tell you about myself, to make you feel easier. Let's swap heart-secrets!" As she said that her face grew soft and sweet. "Won't that be fine? Doesn't matter what my name is, if I tell you what I am."

"A spirit," Bill suggested, and I wasn't overly pleased, for he had never been forward in conversation. He pulled up a bench and so disposed himself that I must needs sit at the farther end, and I took the place with a heaviness not customary, for though I am about as tall as Bill, and better filled out in my parts, I seldom make a seat creak as the bench creaked that night.

It may have been foolish of me to be uneasy about the boy, but she had a look he was not fortified against. But of course it never occurred to me to put the stranger out the door and carry off Bill to bed. For when you looked at that radiant face with the wavering little wisps of hair burning up from her white brow to fade away in darkness,

and when you considered the build of her form—every member so serviceable and at the same time so exquisitely slight, so soul-satisfying—when she said sit down you had to sit; your knees just crumpled.

II

A True Friend Is One Who Loves You Without Wanting to Change You

YES, I'm a spirit," she laughed. "And after we've taken turns telling about ourselves, I'll vanish as a spirit should, never to come back." She looked hard at me—"Unless you call me."

I was so eased to learn that her coming again rested on my call that I dived into a full enjoyment of the occasion. "Very good. And since Bill and I stand or fall together, I'll weave his narrative into my own tale."

"No, father"—never in my life had I known Bill so heady—"every man to his own tale."

I rolled my eyes to bring him to order, and thus set forth upon my own journey:

"I'll not begin with my name, since you seem as familiar with that as myself. After a couple of years on a Mississippi steamboat, I became by

profession and desire a blacksmith. I can hammer out ideas as well as bars of iron, and I prefer thoughts welded together without loss of good material, struck quick while hot, and laid by. When Bill was seven his poor mother died, so for twelve years it's been we two against the world, no quarter asked. I've read the smokehouse full of novels but have never found any book so interesting as the living of a single day. There's my story without the lining or buttons on."

She leaned forward, eager, cheek propped on hand. "Does it ever get so deadly dull that you feel like turning bandit and going out to hold people up, or do *anything* to make things happen? Do you ever get so crushed by the loneliness, and so starved by the hunger for friendship——" She waved her hand as if driving her thoughts into the shadows banked up beyond the lantern-glow. "No, you've never felt all this—no doubt you have at least one intimate friend to talk to about old times."

"So I have—here he sits by my side. Nobody else knows the whole long column of my nature. Others have a few of the figures, but the sum-total is in only Bill's hands. Years ago there was a

man who loved me without wanting to change me; sorrow drew us together—our wives left us at about the same time, what from death, or one thing and another—and as each of us had a child we decided they should marry in due time. When my friend died he left his land made over to Bill just as the girl was made over—though not so palpable."

She asked, flute-notes in her voice, "How old is Bill's intended?"

"As to years, she has him beaten, for she's twenty-one; but as to wisdom, I'd call it a tie."

"If any one loved me"—she clasped her hands, ecstatic at the bare idea—"I'd give that person double of everything he asked and never complain when he didn't pay me back. . . . If I knew he loved me. He needn't tell me so, he needn't make promises, or give me presents, or praise my way of doing. . . . If I knew he loved me. It wouldn't matter how poor he was, if I was more to him than anybody else in the world; I'd say, 'Take me—I'm fortune enough for you!'" She flung her arms wide in invitation, then remembered where she was and laughed, embarrassed, as if we'd heard her talking in her sleep. She apologized: "A girl can't help wondering if

she's worth caring for, when nobody cares for her. Well," she sighed deep, "it's fine for Bill to know there's a girl waiting for him"—and she added with a flash—"even if she *is* older than he is!"

"In all this," my son spoke gruff and ready, "there's too much Bill, and my turn hasn't come."

She took up her story: "I live with my uncle and the Companion—she's that by the job, not by nature—poor, dried-up, always-solemn Companion—she never knew how to soak dry crusts of facts for a little girl's taste. Uncle likes nothing but to hide from the world in his downtown office, so I'm alone all day in a big house where there are no trees or birds, where no one ever comes to see me. And all the time I'm longing to be a neighbor to somebody, wanting it so hard that it gives me a deep pain"—she touched her heart—"down here; but I'm a stranger to all the world."

"Why not begin on the folks next door?" I asked, reaching for something practical. "As a rule they're no meaner than those around the block."

"I haven't told you the dreadful thing," she locked her hands about the rubber cloak where it made a silver letter "U" at her knee, and looked at me with wide eyes full of strange, beautiful

lights such as are not kindled in Mizzouryville eyes. "There's something in me that my uncle can't understand, nor the Companion for all her languages—a craving for anything out of the common." Her voice grew deep and serious. "It's in my blood. Or else it's come from always being shut up in that house with the city calling, calling in a thousand voices. Wherever it came from, it burns like a fever. Once I told Uncle and he was terribly frightened—called me wicked for putting it into words, as if it were a thing I could help! But to-night, as Bill says, I'm a spirit, just flitting about. I can see you're uneasy about me, but I'm just as safe in the open as when locked up. And oh, I'm free, to-night—I'm free!"

She started up, swinging her arms, and Bill dodged. That made her laugh and she sat down again, crossing her feet with the sole of one propped against the hard dirt floor, and the other softly playing along it sidewise in a way to make me feel young and no doubt to make Bill feel he'd gathered up the years for himself that I'd cast aside.

"Uncle let me come to Mizzouryville, knowing it's a dead little place, but there's no place so dead

that seeds of adventure won't thrive in it. And this is an adventure out of the common, every minute of it—I come and go, hugging my freedom like an escaped prisoner. It makes the blood dance and tingle."

"Yes, it does," cried Bill, and he worked the bellows till the picture she made was inlaid in yellow gold; and the prettier she looked the more I marveled that her strict uncle had consented to her wild whim.

After a silence that was full of the music of gurgling rain, she said low and sad, "Now it's time for the spirit to be laid. Do you wonder, Stick, how I knew I could trust you, or how my adventure began? If you want to know—if you want to see me again, just write a line to say come, and I'll come to you."

"And me," says Bill, lonesome.

"Come to the campus of the old deserted College"—she very properly ignored Bill—"and put your note in the little hollow under the second step of the stone stiles. And it must be in a week's time, for after that I'm going away, never, never——"

"Don't!" cried Bill, desperate. "It seems to end everything when you say that."

She laughed. "And now, Bill, tell your story; your turn's come."

"Mine is going to be the longest of all, for I'm full, just brimming full of what I want to say to you." There was no drawl in his voice now as he stood up straight, squaring his broad shoulders. I looked at him hard—yes, it was Bill, all right; for a second it had come to me that mayhap I was dreaming. He looked so purposeful, so bright and resolute, that for a moment I wondered if an orator were to be developed before my eyes. Just for a moment, though. He was almost bursting with what he desired to make clear, but he lacked the cunning.

Not another word did he say. But instead of laughing at him, the little stranger showed a thoughtful gravity mighty sweet to see on a face so young. And as if she had got his message by tongueless, she met his eyes, but couldn't match them, for hers fell at once—and a color came to her cheeks as if she found her adventure good exercise.

Quick and vivid as a flame she started away, and with a hand outstretched to hold us where we were, darted to the big door and was lost in the night.

The June rain dashed against the roof and gurgled in the pipes in the good old sleepy way, and the lights and shadows chased each other among the rafters and along the shavings-littered floor as they had played in my boyhood. The little spirit had come out of wind and rain and was gone with no movement on our part to keep her, and only the damp trail from door to furnace to prove her visit. And yet, oddly enough, the things about us wore a strange look to my eyes, though as familiar as the earth underfoot, for when I stared at Bill a mist seemed floating between us, and there was for the first time in his life a part of him I couldn't see.

III

Hold No Woman an Exception to Her Sex Save the One You Mean to Marry

THE next morning at breakfast Bill's pleased surprise (an emotion ever denied the cook) showed he'd forgotten we were to have mackerel, though he's seen me put it to soak the night before. That proved his a straying mind, but I seemed to take no notice, just set the dish between us with the fish spread wide, the thin, delicate part next me, and the butter melted to a yellow brook amongst the silvery sandbars. It was when I reached for the piping-hot cornbread —without which a mackerel is but a sounding cymbal—that I began my discourse, speaking as it were into the air:

"If plunged over your head in strange experiences, seek footing from books of capable and well-worded authors. Son, when an innocent girl

leaves her home in the books in the smokehouse to seek life or service in the city, the publisher might as well throw in a five-cent handkerchief with his volume for such as have tears to shed. I have a dozen novels to prove that if the girl's young and pretty, to the bottom she must sink when her skirts get heavy in the stream of her adventure. The first flashily dressed young man she meets takes her to a restaurant—good-by! Of course if the wanderer is a young man, it's otherwise; *he* doesn't get caught up, made love to, and then cast aside. And suppose it were so? He's a male and can go about his business with a free mind. A girl doesn't get a knowledge of life till it's too late for her to use it. Therefore, the less we think about what happened last night, the better for you and me and the world we live in."

He said with a tremor in his earnest voice, "Remember the look in her eyes?"

I felt a twinge of remorse as her face seemed to rise before me, but my iron was hot for the forging and I hammered away: "Son, a young girl's feet aren't shaped to make paths for themselves, but to follow the first bold man who tells her she's pretty and sweet."

He spoke very slow. "I've been thinking it over. Books I've never read unless forced, so I'm not up on smokehouse principles. But I don't believe the general run of men are wolves; and a sensible girl is no more a helpless lamb than she's an oyster. Which some are as dumb as," he added, not overly happy in his phrasing. He knew he didn't sound just right, but he hurried on, breathless, "If girls are fools as a rule, that girl-out-of-the-common is a shining exception."

"I'll give you the general rule," I said, seeing I must speak sharp and clean-cut. "Pretty girls can no easier pass through the frosts of life unwilted, when without family protection, than our early beans can get through the spring uncovered on the coldest nights. More than that, you have no right to think any girl a shining exception to her sex, except the girl you're bound to by sacred engagement. I mean Laidie Hightower, your future wife."

"Of course, of course," he agreed, hasty and red. And not another word till he stood to aid me, tea towel in hand. I thought him properly subdued. If not brought to his senses by my reference to Laidie, surely the dish-cleaning was enough to sober him, it being that depressing to a

mettlesome spirit—for woman in the kitchen and man in the shop is nature's law.

But of a sudden he said, coaxing and soft, just as if all my speech had been wind too high above his head to stir his hair: "And this is what I would like, father: to write her the nice little note, just as she said, and put it under the step of the old College stiles."

I was so contracted by surprise that the handle of a teacup came clean off in my grip.

"She's here all alone," he went on, infatuated. "And though she lives with her uncle and the governess, she's felt alone all her life. I'd like to give her an adventure, as that's what she loves. Let's invite her to a little party; it couldn't hurt us, and it'd be kind to her."

I threw the cup-handle out the door where the chickens came to peck at it with about as much sense as Bill was pecking at his idea. And I pressed my lips tight shut as I went on washing the dishes.

Such was his desire to cover the ground before I stopped him that he threw himself forward with rare speed, leaping from phrase to phrase as one springs along railroad ties: "And invite Laidie and her grandfather. And have a nice little sup-

per. Music on the organ, later. And talk and talk and look at the photograph albums—and everything! I want Laidie to know her. I think Laidie will be glad to pick up some ideas. It would simply be great, for me. I'd see how a city girl acts in a parlor. I'd take notes. Father, let me tell you: After our talk last night I felt I'd been lifted up in the air—could see farther than I'd ever seen in my life—clear beyond Mizzouryville County."

"I'm afraid it made you dizzy," said I, pointed. After awhile I swallowed hard and added, "Promise me not to write any such note till I say the word."

"Why, *I'm* not going to write that note—you're to do it for us both."

Which made me feel easier, for you could build on Bill's word as on the living rock. As we left for the shop I told him I'd think it over, and asked if it was my way to oppose his wishes.

"But," he said, "I never before had a wish so deep-bedded and durable. When I get to thinking of that girl wanting to be a neighbor to somebody, with me right here anxious to be neighbored, I get perplexed at the way life keeps wishes

apart. I stayed awake most of last night bothering over my feelings."

"Don't bother any more," I said, growing more and more uneasy the choicer he grew in his words and sentiments. "It shall be just as you wish. We'll write to the girl-out-of-the-common, and invite her to our uncommon party."

For I wasn't so perplexed as Bill about his feelings. And I knew there's nothing such feelings feed on so ravenous and nourished as obstacles. That's why I said, easy and indifferent, "It shall be just as you wish." I wouldn't leave him any fences to climb. If I had set him to climbing, nothing could ever have stopped Bill, he was that proud of difficulties.

IV

Generally the Reason You Think One Man More Trifling Than Another Is Because You Know Him Better

ALL morning we were as busy as could be, and we hurried through dinner (twelve, sharp) and laid the dishes by to be cleaned with those from the supper-table by the bulk—for it was never our way to dampen tea towel oftener than needful. As soon as I had Bill safe at the shop, with a horse on three legs demanding of him a bent back and lip steadied between cautious teeth, I took time off to climb the hill. I wanted to learn something about the girl-out-of-the-common and if news had ripened to a full crop I knew it was to be gathered in front of Lane Laclede's grocery. Under the big glass window (in which nothing was ever displayed that you wanted to buy) and at the edge of an iron grating in the

sidewalk (that accommodated a man with a quid in his cheek) there stood as hard and uncomfortable a wooden bench as ever plagued the human form. From that free bench the day's happenings were served forth seasoned to taste, insomuch that I suppose I had not read a county paper for fifteen years.

"Loafers' Bench," some called it, but Old Settlers' Bench I like better. There, weather permitting, you found Laidie's grandfather, Van Buren Hightower—long since we'd balked at the full name, and "B" was all we gave him: and that dried-up, thin-voiced, childless widower, Jim Bob Peterson, his farm going to weeds and rotting fences; and Taggart Gleason, dressed like a public lecturer, his pretty young wife doing the toiling and spinning at her millinery shop whilst we considered how he grew, and his daughter, almost as young as her step-mother, anywhere but at home. And on that bench you'd find handsome young Lane Laclede unless a customer forced his unwilling legs behind the counter—in which event some one was usually ready to grab his place, Doc Snaggs, maybe, or red-headed Curd Tooterflail.

They or their fathers had helped my father lay out Mizzouryville and I honored them accord-

ingly. Faults they might have, and grievous, but I swallowed each fault with its man, believing that the reason you find one man in a crowd more trifling than another is mainly because you know him better. Nor must I forget to mention that old reliable, Captain Little Dave Overstreet, whom I generally do forget because he is so old.

Knowing I could spend but a few moments idling, whereas they took a day for it with no visible means of support, they began at once imparting their news. Except for the owner of the store, I was twenty years younger than the youngest on Old Settlers' Bench, but I had so made myself a piece of their cloth, matching myself on the garment of their content, that our colors ran intimate and similar.

"Stick," says Taggart Gleason, the only man there who smoked cigars, for his hard-working wife never stinted him, "have you run across an escaped inmate from the state asylum?" And he rubbed his bald place with his hatbrim, always a sign that he'd been forced out of his customary cool, fishy calm.

"Let me tell it!" piped up Jim Bob Peterson. "Nothing never happens to me and I ain't got no energy to start things. I get so languid when I

think of working my farm—languid was my birthmark——"

"Shut up," says Captain Little Dave Overstreet, good-natured but final. "Cork your bottle!" For you either had to stop Jim Bob or leave the bench, his speech was that woody of growth.

"Last night," Gleason said, seeing in my eye that if he didn't tell it at once, there'd be a gone blacksmith, "while it was raining, which it did five-eighths of an inch——" He waited to let some one dispute it, for he was as strong on statistics as weak on principles, and so loved facts and figures that behind his back he was often called "Old Datty."

We disappointed him and he went on: "I was on my front porch reproving my wife for not having had the leak in the shingles mended, and as she was sewing in the back room, I raised my voice as a man may to his wife."

"Now," said I, "your groundwork's laid; go to building." I disliked that man almost as much as Lane Laclede did, but, as he was an old settler, I let him pass.

"I don't know why it is," says Jim Bob, complaining as usual, "but nobody'll ever listen to my

stories. By the time my groundplan is laid my listeners is disorganized——"

"Cork up!" sings out Captain Little Dave. There was an old man, but useful.

"Of a sudden"—Gleason kept on rubbing the top of his head—"a crazy girl jumped right at me looking awful wild. I thought she was going to tear my eyes out. She poured forth the insanest words I ever heard in my life. Now, statistics tell us, based on the data relative to the demented, that——"

"She told him," spoke up Lane Laclede from the doorway, enjoying himself, "that he crammed himself full of useless data so he could dispute from morning till night. And that it's a shame to the town the way he lets his wife work while he never turns his hand to so much as carrying in a bucket of water."

"I've lived to be ninety and aim to grow older," commented Captain Little Dave, "but apart from the invention of steamcars and telephones what we're made so sick of in Thanksgiving sermons, nothing curiouser ever drifted my way."

"It's awful strange," said Laclede, who never missed a chance to prod at Gleason's thick hide,

"that nobody heard the girl but Taggart. Not but what we could all swear to the truth of the story, the words of the wild girl being so convincing, such as would never have reached Taggart's mind but from the outside."

Laidie's grandfather didn't move—just looked at me calm and knowing. Ever since his stroke he'd been safeguarding himself from the second, for the doctor said the third would kill him and the doctor was sober when he said it.

"When I got over my freeze," Gleason went on, "I called for help and ran after the creature to have her put in irons, but she got away. Wait, Stick, I haven't told the worst. This very girl, calling herself 'Miss Cereus,' was one of that bevy of strange ladies who came to town a week ago to take teachers' examination. For that full week she'd been boarding in my house, as tractable as a lamb, yes, sir, eating at my very table. And then of a sudden a screw gets loose and she falls to pieces like that—heaping bitter abuse upon me because I'm not at the millinery shop with my wife sitting here on the bench!"

"She spells her name C-e-r-e-u-s," Jim Bob offered. "Taggart says so."

"I guess she's Rooshun," said Van Buren, very

slow and cautious. "All of them is off, more or less, from the books they write."

"The word isn't Russian," and Taggart Gleason cleared his throat and put on his hat and crossed his legs for business. "The etymology of the——"

I went back to my shop. There was a part of Gleason's account that I liked, a part I didn't, proving it true—for when a story goes smooth it's because it is in a book, and that book not the Bible. Suppose I invited that girl to come to Bill's supper-party to have her telling each his failing as she'd told Gleason and as she'd told Bill; it might not give Laidie's grandfather his second stroke, but it would surely stir up Laidie.

When I related to Bill what I'd heard, he laughed and laughed; but he got no spark from me. "It wasn't funny when the shoe was pinching your foot," I said.

He grew as solemn as a judge. "I'm glad she woke me up—I'm glad she roused my ambition."

I saw I'd gone too far, so I went back without waste of time. "Very well, son, I'll learn to-night from Laidie if she and B. will come to your party; and if so, I'll write the wild creature an invitation for to-morrow evening."

His face glowed—I'd never seen him look so handsome and that drew my attention to the fact that though working in the shop, he was as clean and polished and tuned-up as any fiddle.

"As you seem to be wearing your Sunday clothes," I was mild but pointed, "you might go along with me to visit Laidie and learn her decision."

"I believe not"—that boy always hung back from regular visiting at his sweetheart's house—"but I'll be enjoying myself while you're there. I never knew before that I was such good company. And, father," he went on, artful, "when you talk to Laidie, don't call our guest the girl-out-of-the-common, for Laidie despises any sort of mystery. Just say she's one of the new teachers."

"I very much doubt," said I, "if she'll consent to meet her, however called."

He sighed, but still looked far too animated to appear natural. "Father, when you don't know what to do, pull in your oars and drift. I've been thinking all day, and there's the result of my worryings."

I told him that for so much digging he had got a mighty small nugget. I said, "If you want anything in this world, you must plant the seeds to

raise it. Drifting won't get you anywhere, and listen to me, son: If that girl with the free tongue and name left at home is anything to you but the beauty of a flower in a stranger's garden, the world and your own conscience will hold you to account."

"When you don't know what to do," he said, grim and tenacious, "just pull in your oars and drift."

So I pressed my lips tight shut and would not say another word. For when I find a man with that sort of burr sticking to him, I keep clear for the sake of my own coat.

V

If Not Rich You Must Cling to Respectability

AS soon as our coal-oil lamps were dispensing that odor you smell in our village when a day is dead, and while those few families who had "put in electric light" were yet sitting in darkness—being on meters—I sallied forth to invite Laidie and her grandfather to our supper-party.

They lived at that time on the street that runs downhill from the business center and widens near my shop for the wagon-road to run under the railroad-trestle. Four rooms their cottage had, besides the stand-to kitchen, and no make-believe of sham windows that the attic was anything but empty space to give the roof slant. The yard was so steep that the east end of the front porch was flat on the ground while the other end was as high as a man's head, and many a

time as a youth of twenty had I coaxed Laidie —then only two or three—to jump thence into my arms.

The porch-door opened directly into the front room, Laidie's folding-bed in a corner, the organ in another, and behind the door, loaded with photographs to keep people at bay, the parlor-chair I had laid by from once tilting myself back on its rear legs.

I found her sewing beneath the swinging lamp, its dangling prisms making a rainbow halo over her glossy black hair, while in his rocker sat Van Buren Hightower, his spectacles on his forehead and his gaze on the past. I never went there when they weren't glad to see me, and now each cried welcome, the cries ringing true to my heart like familiar bells.

Van Buren rose slow and cautious, gripping his armchair, and beaming—but remembering his stroke. Tall and thin he was with a mass of white hair poorly cultivated and lines on his face such as troubles cut deepest. His outer garments were neat, for Laidie regularly laid them out for him of mornings duly brushed, he getting into whatever came handiest—but as to his shirt, in that he slept, therefore beyond her jurisdiction;

and one could see from his linen that no street sprinkler drives past Laclede's grocery.

I nodded at B. to sit down again—we men of Mizzouryville seldom shake hands—then turned to Laidie, feeling that if I didn't prove a natural born ambassador, Bill's cause was lost. She had that air of always being the same, such as puts you at home with wholesome people, and a friendly cheerfulness that gives away smiles for nothing; and it was because she was so staid and dependable that I doubted her willingness to fly a kite in any wind of adventure. Moreover, her being fleshy to a degree that often caused her to repine though never to diet, seemed to give her character solidity. Heavy she was not, either in movement or mind; but in form and substance, yes; and in her views of propriety?—That I was to learn.

I said Bill and I were thinking of having a little supper-party with them at table and only one other guest.

"Brother Wane?" queried Van Buren, mentioning our minister.

"Nay, nay, B.," said I, succinct; "there'll be no bone of discord brought to my table as long as there's any other meat. When the preacher isn't

at my elbow begging me to come to Sunday school, he's sending a committee. But I'll never set foot in the church while an organ is being played there. An organ in the parlor and a calf in the barnlot, but neither in the house of God." And my conscience feels so uplifted when church instrumental music is the theme that I could have talked on for an hour.

He asked, "Is it one of the boys from Loafers' Bench? I hope not Jim Bob or Taggart Gleason or——"

I cut him short, knowing he'd eliminate all the crowd, for it's only on the bench that the old settlers best tolerate each other.

Laidie gave that gay smile that always made me think of calicanthus-bloom because on the day I discovered that she was no longer a little girl to be lifted in my arms, she wore some dusky red buds pinned to her dress. And she said, "We'll come to your party, even if the other guest is Giles Flitterfled, himself!"

Giles Flitterfled was the highwayman who had robbed more banks and express-cars than I can remember, yet had never been caught. His father, long since dead, was one of our very first settlers, and though we were ashamed of his son's

deeds, we couldn't help being proud of his escapes. For there's something within that beats quicker over a successful man in a low line than a failure in a high.

I told her that the other guest was a young lady —a stranger. But when I tried to explain, casual, that we knew nothing of her family, she was baffled. Her eyes opened very wide—soft and black they were, to match her hair; she was a perfect brunette such as I admire, being of that order myself. I stumbled on with the little I knew of the girl-out-of-the-common, but with not a word about Gleason's tale, and wound up by offering Bill's opinion that she might like to take some notes of the night-wanderer.

"You don't know her people, you don't even know her name," Laidie summed up, gentle but firm. "I can't come, Stick, but I'll send Grandpa."

"Yes, I'll be there," says B., eager. He was interested.

"We couldn't have a party with only one lady," I maintained, "for adding a man won't add propriety. Bill has taken it greatly to heart that you should join us from the sheer love of adventure."

"But I don't love adventures," she gave me,

uncommonly fixed. From the first I'd felt the blow coming, but Bill's wishes had got into my eyes, half-blinding them to what had to be. I argued away, my words cogent enough, but I didn't dare present the strange girl as one of the teachers, lest Van Buren raise his voice about Gleason's "crazy creature," and I wanted no Old Settlers' Bench gossip to make my protégée ridiculous. I faced defeat; and when defeat isn't dignified it's disgraceful.

I bore away as soon as I could with politeness, and hurried home, finding the yard almost pitchy dark, as it always is without a moon, it's so far from the corner electric arc; and there was poor Bill, anxious for my news.

"Son, I had to beat a retreat, but I haven't lost a single man."

"If she won't come, you've lost everything," he gave me back from a throat so dry that it rubbed his words hard at the edges.

When I buy a load of corn I'm not to be cheated by a wagon scandalously berimmed with heavy mud; in like manner, in weighing a man's speech I know how to cast aside the extra burden of unduly-charged emotion, and I answered mild—my heart always felt the prick when he got a splinter

in his hand: "I've lost nothing worth the having, son, for you have Laidie as lovely and kind as ever. As I watched her sewing there, so light of foot and glossy of hair, though too stout, I grant you, for a fashion-plate, I said to myself, 'Why go hunting adventures when happiness stands at the door?' Pray heaven she'll have patience to wait for you till you're twenty-one!"

He returned, impatient and restive, *"She'll* wait, all right. But what are *we* to do?"

"As to which, Bill?"

"As to seeing the little Spirit again? For see her I must—and talk to her, and . . . and learn things."

Then I spoke plain: "Bill, Laidie was willing to break bread even with Giles Flitterfled, but not with a nameless wandering girl, for some things —I mean social things—can't be tolerated. Giles is a bandit, a train-robber, a bank-robber, I grant you; but he's a male and there's where nature has drawn the line. You and I, Bill, are bound to keep ourselves within the deadline of Respectability. Within that line you can act however bold and lawless; but across that line you dare not set your foot. If we were rich it wouldn't matter what business we followed; but as we aren't, it

does. Our station in the best society comes purely from ours being an old settler's family; that gives us a rank that can't be gainsaid, but we need every foot of ground we've got to stand on, and having no superfluous territory, we can't trim margins like the rich and college-bred. If we don't cling to respectability, we're going to fall."

"Oh, damn!" he burst out, violent and lusty, "damn respectability!"

Then a cool little voice smote on our ears like the sharp tinkle of snapping icicles—"Wait, Bill, don't say another word." And from the shelter of our giant lilacbush, Bill's "spirit" materialized.

VI

If Some One Dear to You Has Ditched His Life You Are the More to Blame for Not Keeping Your Train on the Straight Road

"I DON'T know how much you've overheard," I said stiff enough, trying to make out her face in the dark; but I was sorry I'd been uncomfortable when she answered in a voice that trembled almost to breaking:

"I heard it all. A horrid man saw me slipping past the light on the corner, and he tried to catch me—so I hid here in the bushes; and after you got to talking I hoped every minute you'd go on in the house to let me run away, so I kept still. But when Bill began saying things, I didn't know how far he'd go, and I had to speak out. If he hadn't done that, you'd never have known I came to hide in your yard, for when people don't want me, I don't want them . . . and——" The piti-

ful voice, trying so hard to be strong and independent, broke down completely under its weight of disappointment.

I didn't know what to do. In the starlight the softness and whiteness of her face brought an ache to my heart, and the girlish slimness of her figure took the breath from my mouth. I'd had ten years of married life and as many of freedom, but it's only in the books in the smokehouse that a man of forty is nerve-killed to the pangs of youth. If it hadn't been for my duty to look after Bill, the tears on her cheeks might have dissolved my last grain of worldly prudence. The way that sweet presence seemed to expand delicious fragrance though common sense told you it came from the locust trees, and the way that honey-perfume seemed tangled up in the tender young grass at her feet was one of nature's mysteries such as I gave up trying to solve when a mere lad.

Bill said, husky, but determined, "Somebody does want you. I do. I need you, because—I need you because . . ."

If he could explain that "because," I knew he'd progressed farther than my worst fears. But no; he was at a stonewall, with no experience to guide him to the gate.

I stepped closer to the lilacs. "Young lady, I understand that you came to town to try for a teacher's certificate, but left your boarding-house after giving Taggart Gleason a piece of your mind. I think none the worse of you for that; but when a girl roams the world unattended, no matter how maiden-tender and maiden-shy, she wears out other things than her shoes."

"Somebody does want you. I do." This was Bill putting in his oar.

I couldn't see her expression, but from her lighter tone I knew Bill had wrought more with his few words than I with my speech. "Then Laidie refuses to meet me because I've left my name at home?"

"Just so. She'd as soon think of drinking from an unlabeled bottle in a drugstore as taking up a girl without a family label."

"Is that so? And just to think"—her soft voice warned me that a claw was about to scratch —"just to think that Bill's Intended is a girl like that, and yet that Bill can say *'damn!'* "

I began to shake but put on great pressure to hide it, for often my great bulk betrays me when a thin man can hide a laugh behind a face as blank as a cellar-door.

"Stick"—of a sudden her hand was on my arm, and her words were rushing over me like a strong wind—"you are no stranger, for I heard of you at my mother's knee. She was one of your schoolmates here, years before the college was closed—and I've heard Uncle tell about you. That's why I'm not afraid to trust myself to you." She gave me a pat, then stepped back and said, casual: "But of course I always go well-armed!"

I couldn't help murmuring, "Great fathers alive!" Just then a thought fell ripe from my thought-tree and burst open into capable words: "My dear, let us take you back home; we'll make it all right with your uncle about your rashness. But if you'd rather we wouldn't know where you live, we'll put you aboard your train, and bid you good-by as good friends."

"Or better still," Bill spoke up, "we'll go with you to your city, and put you on a street car without trying to find out where your uncle lives." Now, at that time, Bill had never been to a city; but he made as bold with his "street car" as if it were a hay-wagon.

She moved away to rest her elbows on the top plank of the low fence, and Bill absently plucked the grass where she had been standing. She said,

wistful and despondent, "I wonder if you could understand me? Nobody else does." And she drooped her head. I was glad some lads ran past the gate whooping at fox-and-hound, for their being abroad seemed to lend a sort of sanctity to us three standing, visiting in the dark night.

Suddenly she raised her head and spoke eager and protesting: "Think of somebody as different as possible from the Intended; well, that's Me. You might call me the Unintended, for I'm not cut out by anybody else's pattern. Am I to fold my hands and crush myself into a mold that doesn't fit because people think girls should be 'maiden-tender and maiden-shy'? I want to branch out and up; I'm as interested in life as if I were a man. What the world thinks a girl should be isn't my concern; my part is to be the girl."

"And I think you're a success," says Bill, almost devout.

For Bill's sake I remained unbending: "All this put into a plain man's words means that your uncle thinks you are taking teacher's examination —while you're being chased down dark streets by Taggart Gleason who calls you a mad creature. I don't know who your mother was, but in her

name I call on you to give up your wild doings and let me take you back where you belong."

She wheeled about like a flash and I thought she was going to run straight out of our lives, but it steadied her when she felt the gate-latch under her hand. She halted there, at first looking back at us over her shoulder, but warming up as she spoke, and turning as she warmed, till at the last she was facing us fairly:

"My mother was terribly wronged, so her family thought she should die of it—and she did, for she lived by the world's opinion—she died when I was very young. I was seven before I learned that I was expected to die of it, too. The children in the streets would cry after me: 'There she goes! look at her!' And they'd pretend to be frightened, and run away, shouting, 'Don't let her catch you.' I'd find myself standing deserted, the forlornest little wretch that ever stumbled home to cry her heart out. When Uncle started me to school, the pupils would gather in groups to whisper about my mother's elopement and about my father till I had to leave to be educated by a governess—the Companion. Uncle expected me to be crushed by what had happened before I was born—it had crushed him, it had killed my mother

—why not me? What right had I to be happy? And for a time I was living in a stupid, sullen dream. Then I worked out the resolve not to let anything blight my life that other people had done. Of course it's the fashion to let one act make a junkheap of all the years that follow. You may feed a hundred hungry mouths without getting the latchkey to society, but steal one loaf of bread and you're banished forever. I tell you, Stick, I've thought of all this for years and years, and I say it's a cruel shame to be made to cringe for what I couldn't help."

She came to me quivering from head to foot, and grabbed both my hands. "Stick, the first thing I can remember is mother telling me about what you did on the night of the big fire. And Uncle has often spoken of it. That's what made me brave. For I am brave; I'm not afraid of being in the dark or left alone in deserted houses. And whatever my father was, and whatever he did, I'm not afraid even of *that,* for it's not on my soul. You went through flames when nobody else would venture and you saved fifteen lives, my mother's among them——"

And she poured out words that made me hot and tingling with noble shame of a pliable na-

ture, relating in detail the history of one night in my early manhood which it would ill become me to repeat. And at the end, changing back to a cool and demure young lady, she added, "My postoffice box is still open under the College stiles, but if you don't want me for your friend——"

"But we do," Bill cried, breathless.

"So does Stick—only he thinks he has to be an example." And she gave a laugh so fresh and gay that it left nothing of me but a boy in the husk of a man.

"He needn't think it!" Bill looked at me, reproachful, and I saw that if I lagged in the course of events I was going to be left fatally behind. So I threw off clamps and let the thrill quiver throughout my being.

"My dear child," I said, shaking her hands and well-enough pleased that all this time she had left them in my keeping, "we want you for our friend and we want you bad. If there isn't a note under the stone step telling you so in my best handwriting, by to-morrow night at furthest, it'll be because Bill begged me to let him do the writing. Sweet and tender you are, whether you will or not; but as to 'shy,' I leave you the last word on that. I can't help being sorry you haven't a

strong man at your side when you leave us, such being my benighted views of womanhood, but it may comfort you to know that being uneasy about a girl makes her all the more dear. I don't believe any harm will come to you, if you can keep out of Taggart Gleason's path, and I hope none will come to *us*." For I thought I'd better drop a sly warning to remember Laidie. Bill knew mighty well what I meant, and safeguarded himself with the remark:

"I was just noticing the flowers." And that they were unusually forward with their odors I also had observed ever since our little stranger-friend stepped out of the lilacs.

After that we seemed naturally to drop apart and go back each to his own life with a sweet taste in his mouth flavored by melancholy such as lingers after a loved one has passed through the gate. I could with pleasure have talked to the daughter of my old schoolmate (name unknown) till a much later hour, had Bill been elsewhere; but in every deep joy of life it seems to me there is always a Bill, by which I mean a consideration of respectability to hamper an uprising soul.

Bill and I went to the front door opening into the sitting room. The house is built in the shape

of a horeshoe (my idea) inclosing flowerbeds and a bit of lawn; and the other front door, on the west, seldom used, and more splendid from its colored glass, leads into the parlor. Suddenly into my mind flashed Laidie's face so ready for smiles, and her form, large and comfortable, and her glossy black hair; and I thought the picture lost nothing from the one we had last gazed upon, which pleased me mightily. Bill's "spirit" in her misty dress, her faintly sketched face like a warm lily in the dusk, was but an incident of the night, while Laidie in her rocking-chair with sewing on her knees, was a permanency for the faithful years.

I was just about to give voice to this thought when we came into the light of the sitting-room window, and I saw in Bill's hands a few spears of dewy grass, treasured with unusual care.

I didn't say a word.

VII

There Are Too Many Towns Swelling Themselves to Be as Big as Oxen When by Nature Frogs

THAT same night Bill seated himself to pen, paper, and dictionary, and with legs wrapped about his chair-spindles began a note which did not come to an end till I had reached my pillow. He read it to me, and it was fair and plain, though wordy. The next evening when I was trying to hook my mind, which was drifting, to a book from the smokehouse, Bill brought me the girl's answer:

"I want to see you as much as you could possibly want to see me. I shall give a party Saturday evening at eight o'clock, but you'd better not tell the Intended, for she mightn't let you come. Meet me at the stiles, Stick and Bill, and I'll conduct you to the Scene of Festivity. I'm making

great preparations, and you are the only guests, so if you fail me, there'll be one awfully disappointed little girl in Mizzouryville."

It was hard to lay aside the heavy thoughts of the real world—for I'd heard dreadful news that day—to handle this delicacy with the lightness such cobweb fairy tales require; so I only said, dry and abstracted, "Very well; and now we'll say no more of such folly, for I have a weighty problem to handle."

And that problem I broached with no mealy mouth when I found time, the next afternoon, to run uphill to Old Settlers' Bench. "It has come to me, Taggart Gleason," and I fixed the white-shirted loafer with a stern eye, "that you've sold that strip of land overlooking the Mineral Springs, the property in your wife's name, known as the Rockpile." He began to rub his head with his new stiff hat—he couldn't meet my gaze. Everybody looked at us, athrill.

"It's true," Jim Bob spoke up. "He did sell it."

"Cork your bottle!" Captain Little Dave warned him. "This isn't your affair and if you don't keep out you are like to be trompled."

Gleason tilted his gold-banded cigar as if he

saw no difference between me and a gnat like Jim Bob Peterson, and spoke out pretty rough:

"I'm going to sell it, all right. Nothing'll grow there except every style of weed known to me—and I know all the ordinary varieties." And he'd have begun naming them if I hadn't cut in to ask why anybody wanted it. He gave his wide, fishy grin and said, "Maybe they think it's a fertile field for blasting. That's for them to say."

"Well, this is for me to say"—and I know my voice quivered, for I was piping hot—"this is a move to try to boom the Springs, for your Rockpile overlooks 'em, and it's location that gives property value, whether a piece of land, or a dollar in pocket, or man in the next world. Now, as I happen to own the lot that the Springs are actually on, they'll find some difficulty—but maybe that's what they're hunting."

"I don't know what they're hunting, but their ready money is in the bank, and the title deed is signed and in my desk-drawer at home, and I'll deliver it when they agree to pay the notary public. That's the only stumblingblock. I call five hundred dollars for the Rockpile liberal, but I won't be out half a dollar to a green lawyer raised in our midst and not half as smart as I am."

And I couldn't gainsay that a man is smart who, though able-bodied and only sixty, is kept in good clothes and fragrant cigars by a sweet-faced wife still in her twenties. With such a brain Napoleon made his soldiers think it a favor to die for him. Gleason's brain, of course, was smaller, but you had to measure it by the same yardstick. I tried to reason with the man, to show him what an ill turn he was about to do our town, but I disliked him too heartily to get close to him. However, I do not pretend to reproduce my arguments here, for I am no public speaker such as tells you on the spot what he said on such-and-such an occasion, making it all up before your very eyes, yet pretending to draw it from a well-laden memory.

But this was my substance: No reason could be advanced for booming the Mineral Springs that hadn't been employed, ten years before, in futile efforts to get us a new railroad. And what was the loudest cry?—That it would fill the town with strangers, stretching it to city proportions. All the old settlers had fought that railroad scheme; and now Taggart Gleason, just because he saw a chance to get five hundred for nothing, was about to stultify his conscience.

"Heaven knows," said I, "there are already enough small towns swelling themselves to bursting to become as big as oxen, though by nature frogs."

"Right!" cried Captain Little Dave Overstreet, bending over to slap his wooden leg. "When I hobble to the old frame church, remembering how proud and firm I stepped with my wife by my side, it makes me feel just like a boy. Why, I tread the same old string of rattling planks, or others laid similar, and the weeds grow up through the cracks just as they did then, dogfennel and the like, so that I never take a walk about town without smelling my youth. If you like cities, go live in 'em, but leave dear old Mizzouryville as I've known it for ninety years where there's not a watchdog that doesn't know the scent of the family next door, or a pig running loose that isn't as safe as if it wore the number of its sty cut on its ear."

I had never known Captain Little Dave to speak so at length except when telling of his war experiences, and like-enough I've put words in his mouth spoken by me, in my aim to deal fairly with one and all.

Then Lane Laclede stepped before the bench

and faced us with his head up; and when I saw the glow on his young face and the sparkle in his brown eyes, it came to me for the first time that our grocer was an unusually handsome fellow, and that for all his good-natured, easy-going disposition, there was fire in his heart.

"It may be"—I remember hearing him say this as plain as if I were on the bench of that yesterday, whittling at the same stick,—"that I'd sell more groceries if the town were larger, and get big orders from a tourists' hotel, if built at the Springs, and, as men go, I'm not very well-to-do, but I'd rather move along in the same old, quiet way, with just the customers who've seen me grow up from a kid. And I want to say that if Taggart Gleason has persuaded his wife to sign that deed, he's no honor to the bench I've set out here for you fellows to cluster on year after year."

"If they started up a big new grocery store on yon corner with things at half-price," cried Jim Bob, "I'd still do my trading with Lane Laclede, though as men go I'm as poor as a dog and nearly sixty-five year old." He was really sixty-eight, but I let it pass, knowing all of them were as letter-perfect on the ages of each and every one as

on the standing of the thermometer in the doorway.

"Well, Jim Bob," said Van Buren, hoping to make peace, for Lane's attitude flurried his heart, "nobody's going to make a living off of you, wherever you do your trading." He spoke good-natured, but with a knowledge of how accounts stood.

"Anyhow," Lane persisted, looking at Gleason, "ever since I've boarded at your house, and it's been three years, I know Mrs. Gleason has paid the taxes on the Rockpile; I don't believe she'll permit that deed to leave your desk when I explain to her the plot that's being formed against the peace of this town."

Gleason grew as pale as ashes, and his voice cut like a knife. "I have a wife that does as she's told, according to Scripture. She signed that deed when I pointed out the line where she was to put her name. You've already done as much 'explaining' to my wife, if that's what you call it, as I mean to stand for, and you can hunt you another boarding-place."

"I suppose you're a man to your wife," Lane said, lazy and soft, "but I doubt if anybody else finds you one. And as I put this bench in front of

the store for men, you'll keep off it after to-day." And he sauntered into the building, leaving Taggart Gleason like a stone image with a face cut aslant in ugly lines.

I was so stirred by this scene that I needed only one word from Gleason to loosen my tongue regarding his contemptible sponging on his wife—he and his daughter idling through life and that good woman on her knees to build the morning fires, and with her needle late at night to keep him in fine linen. I walked up and down in front of him several times with my eyes boring on his face, but he wouldn't thrust forward any remark to pry open the door of my just indignation. So I went away dissatisfied, feeling that I was carrying home a load that did not belong to me.

Late Saturday evening I saw the lawyer going to Taggart Gleason's, with Jim Bob Peterson in the offing, as usual, after news. Not long after that along came Richard Purly, an upstart newcomer, a man no older than Lane Laclede, who had been amongst us as assistant-cashier at the bank only seven years, having come here from the East, direct—a young sprig, unmarried, connected in no way with the old settlers, yet having in his head ideas of what he called "town improvement."

The instant I saw him trailing after the lawyer, I divined that it was this half-baked "reformer" who, as agent, meant to seize upon the Springs lands for some corporation in St. Louis, Kansas City, or St. Joe.

I went home brooding over what I had seen, and sank down by the open kitchen window where I go to sit when feeling low, not to be mocked by the smiling politeness of a front room. And there's where I reasoned out that Lane Laclede had grown to hate Taggart Gleason with a dangerous hatred because he had grown to like Gleason's wife with a dangerous liking. And it occurred to me that there's a creaking rustiness in the world's turning unmentioned in my geography.

Out of a maze of forebodings I was suddenly snatched by Bill. "Father, it's time to go to the party!"

I looked up and gasped. Yes, it really was Bill Attum, and I cast aside the first wild idea that a Committee had come to plague me about one of Brother Wane's new plans for increasing his Sunday school's attendance. He was so dressed-up that I saw at once the kitchen was no place for him, so I said, brief, "Let us go."

I had forgotten the party—I had forgotten

everything but the blow threatening the calm content of my town. But I had agreed to sidetrack from the main course of life for a brief excursion into dreamland with Bill, so I coupled on; but I coupled on with a considerable jerk.

There were neither clouds nor a moon. We headed for the College, several blocks away, and as we cut across the weedy vacant lot by the old brick church, I fancied I could make out a black blur in the darkness that brooded over the campus.

Bill noticed it, too. "She's waiting for us at the stiles," he said, happy, and started ahead at a smart pace; but I kept at his side though swift his feet. At first I felt evasive and too large for such sport; but after a time my speed got up my spirit-kite and kept it well in air, until I found my tail flying too high to get trammeled in the branches of any worldly consideration.

VIII

When Your Hour Comes, Though Life's Game Has But Fairly Begun, Fate Must Sound Her Bell

ABOUT six feet higher than the level of the bluegrass lawn, the railroad curves around the old stone wall that encloses the College campus; and at the foot of the walk that runs straight down from the front porch the hedge parts on either hand, and the wall is broken by a set of age-eaten stone steps set in the earth and called "the stiles." That's where we found her waiting. The stars were bright, but in those days there was a thickset row of maples on either side of the campus walk, with branches interlocked overhead, so all we could make of her face was a sweet blur of possibility.

"Is that Stick?" she asked, low and cautious.

"And Bill," put in my son, cordial.

Without another word, she led us between the maple rows. The path was just earth, packed hard by the army of school-children who had marched gaily forth to conquer life, and I knew by my stumbling over knotted tree-roots that stretched from side to side, and by her easy escapes, that the place was as familiar to the girl-out-of-the-common as it had once been to me.

Years ago the College had been compelled to close its doors, for such of our people as were college-bent began sending their young away from Missouri, with the idea that the farther you went after a thing the more it was worth. So up through the deserted yard we stole, sinister and heavy of breath, while she in whispers began telling how she had always imagined flashing carriages and lively music at parties. "I was never at one in all my life, until to-night," she said, so helpless and wistful it made my heart ache. "Have you been, Stick?"

"Many a time. And I always took Gussie Meade." We were going upstairs—there's a porch-staircase on either hand, boxed in, leading to the chapel above, it having been the idea of the builders that though the sexes might mingle on the heights of learning, each had best go up and

down to itself. "Yes, many a time!" My accent was mellow, as my memory climbed down those same weatherbeaten steps, down, down till I reached young schooldays. But I was so dizzy from the trip, and so uneasy in the far-off life of fresh paint and unfinished lines, that I was glad enough to snatch myself out of the past and put forty years at my back.

She reached the head of the steps, saying softly, "So she became your wife?"

"Who—Gussie Meade? Lord, no!" Then I remembered Bill and held my tongue. For it was after Gussie Meade had been persuaded to break our engagement and marry one who was not a blacksmith that I—more to show myself a man than from any other reason—married out of hand, and built Horseshoe House as an emblem of my trade and an object-lesson proof that I was not ashamed of it. Now Gussie was as soft and yielding as her name; but as to Bill's mother, I no more thought of disputing her word than did the dust under her broom, for as sure as I dropped a word, no matter how casual, she nurtured it to a full crop; and no matter how peaceful my intent, as thinking I was to bring forth a figtree, she always found it bearing nettles.

But after her death I realized how good a wife she was, and her monument is as noteworthy as any in the cemetery, though others with more angels. To her I owed the sweet savor of my later years—I speak of Bill; and there is a thought in the foliage of my thought-tree, never quite ripe but growing in flavor year by year, that the monument to her was at the same time a stone to our boy. It's a thought hard to handle, and there I leave it, to get back to my party.

"Be careful," our gallant hostess whispered, gliding to the eastern edge of the upstairs-porch. The big chapel door was of course locked, and I wondered if we were to play Arabs on the floor, with our heels for stools. Around this upper deck, mortised at either end into the brick wall, was a balustrade, and the first thing I knew she stood on the outside of it, such being her dexterity and the darkness, that the poetry of her swallow-flight must needs be left to our fancy.

The floor projected but a few inches beyond the balustrade, and on this ledge she hovered like a bird trying its wings. "Follow me," she whispered.

Bill was over in a trice and I soon enough, though unwilling—for as a boy I had once, in an-

swer to a dare, climbed this same railing, sidled along the ledge to the brick wall, reached cautiously outward to grasp the nearest window-sill (holding the while to the porch-lattice), set one foot in a hole where a brick had been, cast a leg aloft, and thus gained the hall adjoining the chapel. So different life looks to man as his age varies that had every one in Mizzouryville now dared me essay this hazardous feat, I should have heeded them not so much as by the snapping of my fingers. But here was a matter of keeping up with Bill; and I kept up, silent and grim.

"It'll be more like a real party after we get in," she whispered, "but even then we mustn't make any noise or the neighbors might hear."

I said, dry, "Yes, this is a sort of burglars' festival."

That set her to laughing so hard that she had to grasp the lattice with both hands. "I don't care," she gurgled, "the darkness, and the danger of getting in, and the risk of somebody's catching us—I just love it."

"I love it, too," Bill muttered, vague but positive.

Gripping the balustrade with her left hand, she stretched her body far out against the wall and

groped for the window-sash. It was already up an inch or so, and she pushed it high, showing her strength, for all those windows were large, twelve panes to each sash.

She panted: "You must put your foot in a hole under the window——"

"Don't you fall!" Bill warned her, breathless.

"——And throw your weight over on that foot; and then—and then you get in—you'll know how, so you needn't watch me any longer."

"We couldn't help watching," I said. "I calculate there'll be nothing at the party equal to this."

She laughed, nervous, and withdrew her foot from its exploring after the hole. "Stick—and Bill—promise me you'll not look. Under this long black waterproof that hides me I have on a white dress and—and white slippers—and all."

"We can't help looking," I told her. "You ask what's beyond mortal strength."

"Then I go through the window last," she declared, and last she was; but unless I miss my guess, Bill was more than pleased. For to reach the window he must needs pass her on that scrap of projecting floor twenty feet from the ground, insomuch that the closeness of them was as warm

as that of partners waltzing in high life, and similar, and more necessary.

When we were in the hall she closed the window and lit a Chinese lantern, making as little light as might be, unless she had held aloft a glowworm. That mellow ball of red-and-yellow was like a decoration swung on the cloak of darkness, and I'd not have been greatly surprised had it melted right out of her little white hand. At the first splutter of the match, her face had leaped to the eye out of the night like a picture cut from a magazine; and the lantern kept it in a dim light-cloud just like the atmosphere of a dream in which you see wonderful things but not clear enough to soothe the ache in the heart.

At the far end of the long hall, she turned to the door on the left and we were soon in the chapel where I had not stood for many years; a large room, but not nearly so large as I had once found it. I thought it strange that the years could pass away yet leave their smell of blackboard, dusty desks and benches, and empty stove as if it were but yesterday since Gussie Meade and I had cast notes to each other across the aisle.

Our hostess lighted other lanterns and suspended them from a bench just high enough to be

clear of the floor. "We can see the light," she explained, "but it won't show through the windows, and if anybody gets lonesome in the dark he can go and stand among the lanterns."

"Where will *you* stay?" Bill asked; I think he had it in his heated mind that wherever she was there'd be light enough for him; if so, he couldn't give it tongue.

She threw up a south window. "Let's sit here —and begin the party." And on a recitation bench that faced the window we sat in the following order: Herself, myself, Bill. And at once she began saying how thoroughly she trusted "Stick" because of the admiration always felt for me by her poor mother and by her uncle; and she dwelt on the exploits of the night of the big fire. I could not imagine who her mother had been, for in the boarding-house had raged a great confusion amongst towngirls as well as those from a distance. Of course I knew our hostess's mother had come from afar, for the people in Mizzouryville made little of what I did, never mentioning it if they could help it, fearing I might in some way set myself above my fellows.

"Don't talk about that affair," I told her, hoping she would; and talk she did for a time thril-

lingly, and from Bill's restlessness I knew he was longing for desperate deeds into which he might plunge waist-high.

"And now," she said finally, "the program of my party is this: first, we'll enjoy the deliciousness of May"—and she breathed deep of the locust-fragrance wafted through the window on rippling wings,—"while each tells something close to his heart, such as he wouldn't tell to a stranger; then, refreshments. Then we'll act a little play I've made up, reading our parts because there's no time to memorize them. And then we'll say good-by. For I've decided to go back, after this party, to the dead house in the city of strangers where I left my name at home." There was nothing in what she said to bring a tear to my eye, it just came there uninvited as happens at times in the opera house at a tone of voice or a look on a woman's face.

"I'll tell my heart-secret first," Bill said. "It's this—that I don't want you to go away. If you have to go, you must come again. Because I want you to know what your coming here has meant to me. You won't tell me the way to where you live, but you know the way to me. Talk about what is close to the heart—well, that's

the closest to mine! I wish I could explain better, but everything seems so dark, somehow, so dark —and lonesome . . ."

"Then, Bill," I spoke up, warningly, "you'd best go stand amongst the lanterns."

"You stay right where you are, Bill," and she reached behind me to pat his shoulder. "Yes, I promise to come back some day, to find what my coming has meant to you. But, oh, dear! the adventure will all be gone, then—no hiding in this old building, living off grocers' tins, sleeping on my cloak, listening for footsteps . . . Stick, when I came here to take the examinations, I'd no intention of ever becoming a teacher—it was to get away from home for a little freedom. During the week I boarded at the Gleasons' I learned what a dear, sweet woman she is, while he's the coldest-blooded man! He couldn't appreciate his wife, he lacks the nature to feel her fineness—but her boarder knows her worth, and that's the thing nearest my heart. Stick, you're so brave and ready to sacrifice yourself, couldn't you do something to prevent a tragedy in that house? Every day Lane Laclede passed under the roof he saw how Taggart Gleason was squeezing out his wife's heart's blood, drop by drop,

while Mrs. Gleason's step-daughter treated her with open contempt. Now that Lane is boarding at another place, he'll brood over what he knows until one day he'll forget himself, and then . . ." After I'd done my best to reassure her (though my own heart was none too light), she went back to the prospect of having to go home. "Oh, Stick, this breath of freedom has not been very good for me, after all! Isn't there any way for me to stay alive? You are so big and strong—won't you stop Cinderella's clock?"

"My dear child, when the hour comes, fate must strike the bell." Although I deemed her enterprise unbecoming a true woman—whose place is beside her own hearthstone—her sadness overflowed her bosom and filled mine. Such is the witchery of southern breezes and a maid's face softened in summer gloom, that it came to me with a bitter pang that it's cruelly unkind of fate to sound her bell when hearts are young.

IX

Often We Shrink Not So Much from the Thing as from the Name the World Gives It

I KNEW that what lay nearest my heart couldn't interest a young girl fond of adventures, so in as few words as possible I recited my foreboding of a tourists' hotel to be built on the Gleason Rockpile overlooking the Mineral Springs, thus raising from its grave that old specter of a new railroad. I painted the unrest that comes to a village when, ashamed of its size, it longs to set up factories to vomit smoke in the pure air.

My point of view was too high, for she had always supposed that a small town, like a small boy, lusts for growth.

"This is nearest my heart," said I, "that the peace of Mizzouryville is threatened. But I'll speak of it no more, for a speaker is successful

only when he gives out what folks want to hear—so change your program."

She rose.

"Wait," said Bill.

She sat down again.

"Something has been on my mind a long time," he said. "It is this: How can a person tell when he is in love? And when I say 'love,' I mean such as a man ought to feel for—for——"

I thought when he commenced that he would run aground, and I thought true; but I must admit I'd been struck too hard to steam to his rescue.

But she helped him off the sandbar. "Do you mean the Intended?"

"Yes. And this is a serious thing. I ought to know."

She said, constrained, "Can't you tell by the way you feel when you're with her?"

"I don't feel nothing," says Bill, letting go his moorings, and driving so hard that his grammar was a total wreck. "I don't feel nothing."

"Bill," I reproved him, "this talk ought not to be."

"I don't feel nothing," he maintained, dogged; "with her, or without her."

"Yes, you do," she got up quick and impatient. "When you kiss her——"

"I never did!" And though in the dark, I knew he was as red as a morning sky.

"That's the way to find out—and I'm going after refreshments; and when I come back," she said, conclusive, "there mustn't be any more of *that.*" And when she was gone, I gave Bill a piece of my mind, seeing he hadn't sufficient of his own.

Neither he nor Laidie had ever hinted that their marriage might not take place, and I was a living illustration of the truth that mutual love has less to do with conjugal happiness than a similar taste in meats and vegetables. "Nor would I have consented to this night's doings," I told him, low and gruff—for when my voice is lowered, it rasps at its bonds—"had I imagined you'd show any wavering."

"I'm not a-wavering," he said, hasty, "I'm just wondering over the mystery of my feelings."

"All the people I've ever known," said I, "who married without considering property advantage or family station, soon wore holes in the back of their romance; and the characters who marry for love only, and have only love to go on yet stay

happy to the last line, are in the books in the smokehouse."

"I'm not a-wavering," he pleaded, fearing she might return and hear us.

Presently the refreshments were spread where the lanterns hung low, and we crouched there, our backs to the windows, strange shadows flickering over the calcimined ceiling, and the candles threatening to catch their flimsy paper envelopes afire.

I do not remember what we ate, by which I know there were no solid victuals; but everything was pretty and small, each sandwich offering divers conflicting tastes, no particular flavor riding above the others to give it a familiar name. While eating, our talk flowed low and mellow, and little memories I had thought dead came creeping out into the sunshine of the girl's hearty good-fellowship—one never knows whether certain memories are dead or torpid, till spring comes again. Also, Bill seemed to germinate. But I could no more repeat our talk in that clandestine dining-boudoir than name the sights and odors of an April day when the plow turns up the garden soil and the children come whooping home from school, and the doves catch their long note for soothing summer harmonies.

She was the spring—the lantern-glow on her face, and on her bosom some yellow roses from the scraggy old rosebush by the college well, its roots bedded under rocks that had protected them half a century. Because of the delicate fragrance I felt steeped in the days when that same rosebush had grown sister-roses to those now blooming—roses for me from Gussie's hand. And right then a thought began to bud its leaves in my thought-tree of which more must be said anon, and under its influence I grew young as Bill grew old.

When the feast was ended—"Now for the play!" And she drew forth three manuscripts, one for each. "It's an allegory," she went on, producing candles set in square boxes with a side of each removed, that the light might shine out upon the paper in the manner of dark-lanterns. "I am Wisdom, and Bill is Youth. I stand on the platform, and Bill at the farthest corner of the room, because Youth is very far from Wisdom. But gradually he comes closer——"

"That's great," says Bill, gratified. "Do I get you at last?" And he marched away with his candle-box, examining the end of his manuscript, eager.

"And Stick is Prejudice," she explained, "which is found everywhere, so he can move all around as he pleases. But he must take pains to keep getting between Youth and Wisdom."

"I'll surely keep you two apart," said I, determined.

The play began with Bill's reading off in a round voice that his father's ways were good enough for him, and of course I, as Prejudice, cheered him on; but Wisdom always had the last word and the best and soon Bill began to doubt the advantages of plowing with a stick, and the like, and every time he conceded a point he took a stride toward the platform. I was given arguments against progress so flimsy and foolish that I grew ashamed to read them, and every time Wisdom checked them off, Bill's voice would ring out hearty praise, till presently he was very close to the wise goddess. Unluckily my directions read that I must "stand to one side, looking dark and forbidding." When I thought of Laidie, it was not difficult for me to look dark, but I was where no light could reveal my darkness.

Bill, at the foot of the platform, read out in triumphant tones, "Thou art right, fair goddess of Wisdom, and I grasp thee by the hand!"

And with that he reached up and caught her hand, though she had meant no such thing, but had written in a figure, for goddesses may not be touched by mortal fingers.

"Hold on there, Bill," I warned him, starting forward, very uneasy, "that is not down in the play."

She caught sight of my face then, and seeing that it was truly "dark and forbidding," was set off in merry peals of laughter, delicious though aggravating.

Bill turned to me with "All right, father, I'm a-holding on!"

I knew the longer she kept laughing the longer he would keep holding, but the more I scowled the harder she laughed, till at last the sparks from her merriment kindled a blaze in my own breast and I laughed in the general illumination. And nobody enjoyed it more than Bill.

"Help me down," she gasped, from the height of the platform, shaking unsteadily from her hysterical mirth. He reached up his arms and he did help her down, tender and slow.

But hardly had her white slippers touched the floor when a crash came directly under the spot where we were standing, sending strange clap-

ping echoes from remote walls of the lower story.

No laughter now! she snatched away her hand and ran to blow out the lantern.

"Whoever it is, let 'em come!" cried Bill, cocked and primed to prove himself a hero.

"I mustn't be found here," she gasped. "Don't you understand?" And out went all the lights.

I understood, for all of a sudden it came to me how very odd was our situation up there, and how much odder the community would hold the affair. Now, there are a thousand things of a wondrous sweetness which, if spread to the public taste, must needs leave bitterness in the mouth—and here was a thing that simply must not be uncovered. To my dying days I would be regarded in a shifted light, but what was far more to me—Laidie's opinion of Bill would become discolored, and Bill was always the butter on the bread of my content.

"Listen!" Bill ordered, hoarsely—for like myself, he couldn't whisper.

There was a stumbling footstep on the hall-stair.

"He's coming up," said the girl-out-of-the-common. "Must have broken in a window, downstairs—guard the doors; keep him out of the

chapel till I've locked myself up in the little place I've been using as my bedroom." And she began to feel her way toward the northwest chamber, which in old days had been the music-room.

The chapel had two doors on the east, both opening into the hall, one at each end of the long blackboard. Bill and I braced ourselves against them as up the stair at a great speed, and with much noise of boots, came that intruder, equally unwelcome to Wisdom, Youth and Prejudice. If he found entrance, the girl would be gone; but how were we to explain the fragments of our sandwich-barbecue and those romantic lanterns? At the very best we would be set down as fools. And if the girl were found . . . What I dreaded was the name of the thing.

My suspense was fraught with such nerve-racking dangers, and found itself so helpless to invent plans while those footsteps were pounding up the stairs, that the last line on one of life's closely crowded pages seemed to have been written.

X

You Can't Find Out if You're in Love by Kissing the Wrong Girl

THE next half-hour was the quickest-actioned —barring the time of the big fire—I have ever known. Bill and I held each a door against the coming of the unknown man, with our hostess hovering on our flank; and when he reached the head of the hall-steps I braced myself with all my strength and thanked God I was a blacksmith.

But the man hurried down the hall with no intention of exploring the chapel—and up the attic staircase sped his eager feet till suddenly silence fell, and we knew that in the wide, unplastered space above, his form was crouching. I heard our hostess whisper, "Stick—where are you?" For without the candles, nothing was to be seen but ghost-lights swimming before the windows.

"Here *I* am," Bill called, low but penetrating.

Softly as a leaf blown down the street, she went to him and I hastened to join them, very uneasy.

"I must say good-by!" She caught my arm, nervous and hasty. "I can never stay here after a spy has come to watch. I must go this very hour—and go all alone. Good-by—good-by . . . Oh, Stick, you've given me something to think about as long as I live!" And I think she took Bill's hand.

"Yes—better go quick," I said, "for I hear men's voices in the yard—and don't forget that a true woman stays at home with a good lock on her door."

"Dear old Prejudice!" She drew me down and kissed me heartily.

Bill asked, wistful, "When are you coming back to see what I've made of myself?" There was silence, and a pause; then, like a bird, she skimmed along the wall where the blackboard was painted on the plastering, and out into the hall through the door I had deserted.

"Father," Bill said in a muffled voice, "I'm afraid that plan to find out my feelings for Laidie isn't going to work."

"What do you mean?"—I was uneasy.

"Why, well, you see, father—I've gone and kissed the wrong girl!"

"Bang!" came a noise from overhead, and the plastering rained down upon the floor; evidently the fugitive in the attic had stepped off a beam upon mere lath-and-mortar. This lime-shower came as a counter shock to Bill's words, and as one violent motion destroys another—like the waves in my book on physics—my mind went perfectly blank.

Into my blankness then burst the uproar of swift feet and angry voices from below, proving that the creature in the attic was hiding from men in full cry.

I recognized the harsh, vindictive tones of Taggart Gleason so different from his ordinary oily smoothness: "Look in the dining-room!" He meant a long inner chamber where once schoolboarders had been served.

"Or in the little closet under the hall-stairs," came the lazy, unruffled voice of Lane Laclede, as if he found it good sport.

"No, no," shouted a third, "he wouldn't stop down here—upstairs, boys!" This was an offshoot of our highest family. Educated at Missouri University, Lancaster Overstreet had

brought back the mental stores of a fairly good lawyer, and the natural greenness that he had carried there. It was he and that assistant cashier (Richard Purly) who had gone to Taggart Gleason's, a few hours earlier, after the title deed to the Rockpile, and I wondered if the present chase had ought to do with that matter.

While they were on their way upstairs, the fugitive, panic-stricken, decided to come down—and down he came in a great hurry, sending up dust and plastering in choking clouds. It happened all so quick that the girl had not been given time to reach the hall-window; and she stopped helpless as the pursued man leaped in front of her and grabbed at the closed sash to push it up.

"There he is!" came a shrill voice from the yard, causing the man to pause, rigid. His discoverer was Cadwitch Beam, a man who never could have been elected sheriff had he not always voted the straight ticket, therefore must needs be voted for. "There he is at the south hall window upstairs!"

At the keen-edged cry, some nine men came swarming up the stairs with lanterns of good clear glass and sturdy wicks showing the startled girl midway of the hall, with the man at the win-

dow blocking off her escape, yet himself too timid to essay it.

All this I saw through a cautious crack of the door; and having waited for the pursuers to get well forward, Bill and I slipped out in their wake as if we had been with them from the beginning. So triumphant were they at cornering their man, yet so dumbfounded at sight of the girl, that they gave us no heed, but stood stock still in a daze. And the man at bay, with his back to the open window—he, too, stared at the girl, and at the group of us men huddled behind her, as if petrified.

Richard Purly was the first to come to life. Dashing past the girl, he grabbed the fellow by his sleazy old coat. "You fool"—and he tore away what he was holding to—"give up that title-deed!" Then I saw that the fugitive was Jim Bob Peterson. Well, yes, he was a fool—not only that night, but every day in the year; but to hear him so called by a newcomer was too much for me, and I strode between them with a light in my eye. It was plain that Jim Bob had shouldered a load too heavy for him to carry, but I let Purly know plain and simple that if an old settler was to be termed Fool, the task did not

fall to a raw assistant cashier, but seven years in our midst.

"Jim Bob," Gleason roared, but not daring to cross my path, "give back my title-deed or Dick Purly'll have the law on you."

And Lancaster Overstreet coaxed, "I'm bound to tell you, Jim Bob, as your friend, and as Purly's lawyer, that you've committed an actionable offense."

"In plain words," Gleason snapped, "you're a scheming old thief!"

"I haven't got that deed," Jim Bob mumbled; "search me and see."

In the meantime, the girl finding herself caught in a trap, thrust her hand into her bosom in a nervous way that brought to light a slip of paper.

"She's got it!" shouted Lancaster Overstreet who, less lawyer than youth, had watched her more closely than he had Jim Bob. "That lady has the deed!"

"If you dare touch me——" she said, low and fierce, standing with back to wall.

Bill would have interfered right then, but I gave him a warning shove. If we showed acquaintance with the girl-out-of-the-common, it

would have been none the better for her and I'm not saying, now, what it would have been for us.

"Young lady," said Lancaster with a polite bow, feeling of the middle part in his hair, and smoothing at his tie lest it be riding his collar, "we know Jim Bob has slipped you the title-deed to keep for him, but I'm sure you weren't told that it's stolen property. Jim Bob took it from Mr. Gleason's desk; it's a deed Mr. and Mrs. Gleason signed more than a week ago, making over some land at the Springs to my client, Mr. Richard Purly."

He stopped to swallow as was his wont when his mouth was full of words. "It wasn't recorded, for we couldn't agree about the fee until this evening. I know Jim Bob was following us, and when we went into the garden he must have slipped into the house. As soon as we found it gone, Mrs. Gleason, to our amazement, said she regretted having ever signed the deed, and she refuses to sign a duplicate."

"My wife," said Gleason with an ugly look at Lane Laclede, "has been influenced by fool arguments about what's for the good of the town, and it shames me to have to admit that she sets up her opinions against my authority."

"Young lady——" Lancaster coaxed, smoothing his hair-scallops.

"I've never met the gentleman you call 'Jim Bob'," she spoke clear and cold, "and I know nothing about the title-deed. But I do know how Taggart Gleason loafs about town with his hands in his pockets while Mrs. Gleason is working her fingers to the bone. And I glory in her spirit, that for once she dares have a mind of her own."

"It's the crazy school teacher!" Taggart shouted, his eyes green with spite. "Boys, Jim Bob has persuaded a poor mad girl to cover up his theft, the same girl that boarded at my house till she lost her mind and raved at me—I've been trying to remember where I'd seen her."

"Well, *I* never see her before," said Jim Bob, helpless.

"Jim Bob," I demanded, stern, "where is that title-deed?"

He looked at me, reproachful. "I'm not a-talking, Stick Attum."

Purly interrupted: "We all saw that it's hidden in her dress."

Desperate, she snatched the paper from her bosom—"Take it!"

Snatching it from her fingers he ran with it to

the nearest lantern, and Bill, looking over his shoulder, read aloud: "I perceive, O Youth, that thou art very near Wisdom . . ." It was a part from our play. "That's no deed," said Bill, showing it about, then putting it into his pocket as a souvenir.

"But where *is* the deed?" Taggart Gleason was beside himself with disappointment. "Sheriff, I demand that you arrest both of them on the spot."

"Easy now, Taggart," Sheriff Beam said, "remember our jail is being repaired and couldn't hold a man, even Jim Bob; and there's no place to put a lady. Just let Jim Bob tell us where he put the deed——"

"I'm not a-talking, Cadwitch Beam." Jim Bob had found a phrase to his taste, and kept his tongue to it: "I'm not a-talking."

"The girl's got it," snarled Gleason, "and by —— I will have it!" And he made a rush at her. But the next moment, in his recoil—for he was too old—he went down in a heap; and there stood our plucky hostess with a light in her eye and a pistol in her hand. She had the best of the argument, as Wisdom always should, by right.

"Look out, boys," and I lifted my arms high, pretending to be scared to death, "put up your

hands, or you're dead men!" Bill imitated me, and it proved contagious. Even Gleason, huddled on the floor, raised palms above ears while propped upon his elbow.

"Now, Mr. Jim Bob Whoever-you-are," she said, unkind, motioning her pistol at my inadequate old friend, "go over there and join your own crowd, for you don't belong to mine."

As he slouched amongst us, thus clearing her way, she slowly stepped backward to the window, saying, crisp and cold, "If I knew where that title-deed was, I wouldn't tell."

I don't know how she did it: one moment she was covering us with her pretty silver-mounted weapon; the next, she was skimming through the window and was gone.

"And she's got that title-deed!" Gleason groaned, seeing the money for the Rockpile melting away. "Hasn't she got it, Jim Bob? *Hasn't* she?"

Jim Bob rolled his eyes, desperate. "I'm not a-talking," he gave us.

"After her, boys!" called Purly springing toward the window with me close behind to check him, though I did stop on the way to swing Taggart Gleason to his feet. He had cut a sorry

figure, truly, but, after all, he was old and had spent his years in Mizzouryville, and had married a girl very dear to me.

On being lifted up, he darted after Purly like a toy horse that spurts forward when first wound up and set with wheels to the floor; and they two were almost at the wide ledge when in a flash there was the girl-out-of-the-common with her pistol leveled through the open window, looking uncommonly capable. I don't believe I ever saw a lovelier sight, not in an animated way.

"I forgot to say good-night," she murmured, aiming straight at Purly's temple.

He reeled back with his hands before his face, and down again on the floor went Taggart Gleason, his terrified eyes rolling toward me as if to ask why I had ever picked him up.

She looked down at him and said, "God help the woman who swore to obey you until parted by death!" She didn't sound angry or scornful, but sort of prophetic, I thought. After a silent minute, she looked over at Bill with a special gleam in her eye like the last dance of a candle before it says farewell. Then she vanished to go back to the world where she had left her name.

XI

If a Man's Work Stops with His Last Breath, It's a Mighty Poor Life That Hasn't a Mighty Big Work to Show for It

THE events of that night are as closely linked together in my memory as if I held the chain in my hand. But after that, sharpness of vision is blurred by a number of overlapping impressions such as faintly picture the average days of one's life, and out of all nothing stands forth with notable persistence.

After Bill found the title-deed hidden away in the attic, no one thought less of Jim Bob's judgment or execution, because less couldn't be thought. The recovered paper did not clear the strange girl from dark suspicions; for the Chinese lanterns and scraps of food found in the chapel put her in a bad light as one flying the earth with no place for the sole of her foot.

At Taggart Gleason's expense (or, to be exact, at Mrs. Gleason's) there followed an orgy of detective work, conducted by our young lawyer Lancaster Overstreet—more often called "Lanky." Every time I visited Old Settlers' Bench, I was relieved to find that none of Lancaster's "working hypotheses" for the finding of the little wanderer had wrought a finished job. I was content that she should never be heard of again, for though charming, she was disturbing to a settled man. I was built to ride in a safe harbor, and never find myself blown out into an uncharted sea without straining my eyes for familiar land. And as to Bill, did he not have Laidie in prospect?

But when some one comes into your life and touches your soul, you can never be just as you were before—and Bill had been touched to the depths. There were times when I considered with bitterness the lines of our divergence, we who had always traveled parallel. . . . Such a small household—just the two of us! I had always thought the shop would be for Bill when I was gone; not only the hull of a building, but the memories he should inherit along with the property. When I made the discovery that he meant

to be no blacksmith, I looked ahead and seemed to see the end of my lifework. It would stop with me. When the anvil should ring with that music that's fuller of meaning than any on concert program, the hands of a stranger would strike the blows. Times came when I'd suddenly stop in my labors to ask myself, Why go on building up a business that my arm alone must sustain?

But at first, like Jim Bob, I wasn't saying anything. When I'd come upon Bill in some corner with his forehead wrinkled and a scabby textbook in his strong hand, I would make as if it were no more to me than a fly on the ceiling. I had opposed his stopping school, for though too much learning will sink a man unless of stout bottom, a moderate amount helps keep him afloat; but when stop he would, I gave him fair wages in the shop. For, as I see it, the money that your work yields is the honey in the flower.

I had dismissed a steady hand to give Bill his chance, so he didn't feel it honorable to ask release, yet I found him restive in the harness, his heart lagging behind his feet. In the early hours and late at night, he made bold with his books.

Of evenings we had been accustomed to rise at the stroke of nine, to close the day's history. I'd

lay in its niche my unfinished novel while Bill would stand on end that guitar for which, in an evil hour, he had taken a liking—and it was "good-night," and each to his own chamber, with the breeze rippling over the bed and only the sunrise to tell us we had been asleep.

Now all was changed. When he at first began to mutiny against bedtime, I'd prop my eyelids for an extra chapter, unless my book said, "And now let us return to so-and-so," in which case I could never bear another word. But when I found that no matter how I might bivouac with him about the lamp, he could go me an hour better, as having the brace of youth to his back, sometimes I'd artfully lay out the guitar for him to stumble over. He, however, was not to be coaxed upon his "Spanish Fandango," of which I had formerly had more than enough. As he labored under his self-imposed slavery, I knew just as well that the history, rhetoric, or what not was giving him pains, as if a doctor had just mounted his horse to ride away, a glass of medicine left on the table covered with an old letter, a spoon atop to hold it there when the door should open. And when at last he found himself floundering in mire too deep for his length of leg, I knew our minister would get him.

Brother Wane was a good man, though wooden; and such was his zeal to get people out to meeting (though handing them but little when they came save warmed-over foodstuffs) that he would go a mile to persuade a man churchward—his visits acting upon me contrariwise. He, honest soul and learned, gave Bill many a pull to his feet that landed him in the pew of Sundays, no doubt thinking to lure me thither. But too well did I know what would be my portion there; for to such a degree did Brother Wane exhaust and strain himself to keep going the church machinery —his committees working upon each other like cogs of neighboring wheels, and his couriers sent flying on special missions such as Flowers, the Sick, Transients, Stay-at-homes and Sunday school pupils whether Red Button, Blue Button or simply Banner—there was, I say, nothing left of the man when in the pulpit but a physical reaction. But of course it was chiefly the organ that kept me at home to my Sunday newspaper, for when there's no obstacle but a dull sermon, I can sit at bay as well as another, and feed my belly with dry husks.

In the meantime, I was kept uneasy over Taggart Gleason's expulsion from Old Settlers' Bench.

To be sure, when there he was little but a dispute; but knowing little else was to be expected, we had borne ourselves accordingly. After the quarrel he became a permanent figure in the Bank Corner crowd, and there would he abuse Lane Laclede to whosoever would listen—which means every man not stone deaf. For though the Bank Corner men preferred to discuss the market prices of corn and cattle, they were ready for a tale highly seasoned, and abuse was welcomed, not from ill-nature, but as seeming more meaty than kind words.

It was about this time that Gleason took up what he had laid aside the year before his marriage—I mean, the habit of drinking. Not being able to carry it so well as in younger days, he grew loud-mouthed about his wife, charging her new-born freedom of mind to unfaithfulness, and laughing without mirth because in spite of her disloyal refusal to sign a duplicate deed, and in spite of her pleading that the original deed, when found, be destroyed, the Rockpile—hers by inheritance—was now the property of Richard Purly, with the purchase-money in the bank to Taggart's account.

Lane Laclede heard what was being said on

Bank Corner, and though he gave no sign of heeding, his deep calm did not deceive those who knew him best. I remember hearing Captain Little Dave Overstreet whisper one day, as he crossed his legs with the aid of both hands, "Lanie is a generous creditor, but Taggart Gleason will have to pay the reckoning." And whenever that old soldier got his wooden leg crossed over the other, it was like drawing black lines to underscore his words. It's small wonder that the girl-out-of-the-common faded from my mind.

But Bill remembered, and the drought of that August did not put an end to his mental growth. I knew if I took notice of him openly he'd stand in his pillory till he dropped. I tried to find comfort in my own experience in such bouts—for at the beginning of everything, there is a certain ease—but however beguiling a book of learning may begin, as, "The world is round like a ball," before you know it, you've been sent in quest of some name on a fine-print map that proves your world no smooth rolling.

But when September came, the clench of Bill's teeth had not relaxed. So, one Sunday afternoon, I asked him into our shop, to open up the subject.

XII

A Man's Horizon is Enlarged as the Years Lift Him Up; the Youth Sees Only the Road at His Door, the Mature Eye Glimpses Whither He Is Bound

BILL——" I began . . . and somehow I seemed to have said all. The shop had the cool, unusual smell of a holiday, being tight-closed but for one wooden shutter that made of the sunlight a yellow ladder stretched across the dirt floor. Bill was all dressed up and looked mighty fine, having, since breakfast, been Sunday-schooled and churched and choir-practised, and yet having before him his weekly call on Laidie, a young people's society, and Brother Wane at night laboring in a sea of rhetoric.

Bill turned a trifle pale, feeling a struggle coming, and I thought I had never seen him so straight and handsome—and determined. I had

a blind impulse to wave my arm at the anvils, the rows of horseshoes, the wagonbed on its trestles, the wheels against the wall, with the warm gloom cut by the golden light mellowing all. But what was the use? He was looking beyond these things; they were never again to catch at his heart.

I walked to the workbench and looked under it just to gain time, for I knew my voice had slipped anchor and would drift in a gale; but when I came back, I was, as far as he could see, the same old Stick Attum talking to the same old Bill. "Son, are you as bent on getting an education as once you were set on getting rid of the little you had?"

He smiled and was relieved, though what he'd expected, I cannot say. It's a law of nature that no young person can look back at himself from what he'll be in twenty more years, to marvel at his greenness. "More," he said, resolute. "When you can find a man to take my place, I'm going to law-school. Every summer I'll earn enough to carry me through the next school-year; you'll give me a job, won't you, father? And when I've graduated, you'll close up shop and come to live with me in the city."

He had thought it all out, planning as young people do—building a nest for his parent out of the stuff of his own dreams. Leave the shop, or live anywhere but in Mizzouryville, I never would while the heavens were above me, but as to that I said nothing. Let bright visions glow before young eyes; they fade all too soon.

Suddenly I asked, penetrating, "Not a-wavering, Bill?"

"Of course not," he answered, dry and hasty. Presently he quoted the speech Purly had taken from the girl-out-of-the-common; he knew all of it by heart: "I perceive, O Youth, that thou art very near Wisdom. Develop that which is within thee, work to the utmost the true metal in thy being, separate it from the dross—be a Man." And at the last his words rang as in a public hall.

The silence was broken only by the shavings rustling under my feet as I went here and there. At last I could speak quite steady. "Bill, *I'm* a Man, ain't I?"

"Best going," says Bill. "And I want to make good, too. You've worked your metal to a finish and I want to work mine. I don't believe a young man ought to imitate another, but to develop

himself. I could be a blacksmith, of course, but there's other metal here"—he struck his breast in utter unconsciousness, for never would he have made a gesture on purpose. "It isn't that I think a lawyer is better than a blacksmith, but I can't be a true man any other way, and, father, I mean to be a true man—like you."

I went over to the empty furnace and worked the bellows aimlessly. Somehow, the way Bill talked filled me to the brim; and when he named me a true man, it seemed as if my heart were flooded with a sort of calm glory. But he never knew of my sensations—just thought, like-enough, that I was looking to see if the ashes had been emptied. As to that, I left him untroubled. Had I tried to explain myself, I'd have been but the foreign tongue of middle age to the untrained ears of a young man.

He went on, his head up: "There's something in me to be worked, and I'm going after the metal. I'd like to meet the little Spirit some day, just to let her know she didn't make a mistake, the night she located my mine."

"Well, if you never meet her, it won't matter, as she's not one of the share-holders. But I want a few shares, son, such as you can spare

from Laidie; and to back up my claim, I mean to invest right now. I have enough money in the bank to stake you, and if it's lost, I can stand it—that's the only system for lending to kinfolks. And you're not to come back home next summer to work for college-money. Make the first stay till Christmas after next."

He shook his head. "No, father, I mean to be independent."

"Bill, Mizzouryville is full of independent folks, some of 'em Job-poor. Why, blacksmiths are a thousand times more independent than lawyers. No, son, if independence is what you're after, go and sit on Old Settlers' Bench. What you want is success in a city. Well, to get that, you must have polish, and I don't mean the kind you can buy in a bottle. What avails the strength of a horse if kept in the stall? Likewise, a lawyer is stalled without clients, which I claim as a flower of speech," said I, "though possibly of no higher degree than a sunflower. Now, to get clients, you must make friends which you can't make by being independent, for while friendship quickly springs from the surface, it strikes deep only with the forbearance of years—which is a century-plant at your service." And I made him

a low bow out of an engraving that set him laughing.

"Now get your hat," said I, succeeding fairly well in a cheerful manner, "for on my thought-tree there's fruit grown ripe for the plucking; fruit that will feed me a lawyer in the Attum household, unless I am much mistaken."

So we went at once to the big brick mansion after expert advice—the only house in Mizzouryville with three stories and a cupola.

XIII

The More You Have the Less You Need Pay; the Rich Man Can Have the World's Homage Without Spending a Penny to Get It

THIS was the fruit of my thinking: to seek advice of Mrs. Peggy Overstreet who stood on the topmost rung of our ladder of rank. She always greeted me kindly enough though never cordial, being heavy from the weight of importance. For her husband, Big Dave Overstreet, was as near a millionaire as was ever seen in our town; and Mrs. Peggy, in consequence, took no delight in any one who, like myself, refused to bend the knee. As guardian of Gussie Meade, she it was who broke off our engagement to have her marry a man who was not a blacksmith; and as aunt and patroness of Lancaster Overstreet, she was now standing between the young lawyer and Taggart Gleason's daughter.

When we were shown in—as carefully as if I did not know the way—we found Zenia Gleason —Taggart's daughter—as small and pretty and useless as usual, and, as usual, worshiping Mrs. Peggy with all her eyes; and I told myself that Zenia, by servile homage, thought to feed her social cravings from the crumbs that fell from the great lady's table. Even at that early day it was my judgment that Zenia cared less for the body and soul of poor Lanky than for the fact that the Overstreets threw the shadow the Gleasons walked in—for if there was ever a Gleason worth five thousand dollars, I never heard of him.

Mrs. Peggy knew very well I'd no more think of coming to her mansion for a social call than she'd visit my shop to be shod; but my mother was an Overstreet, therefore it was not the same to her as if I were a blacksmith clean through to my backbone. As soon as I said "private business," she turned and dismissed Zenia Gleason—

"Run along, child," she said, just as if Zenia were a pink-faced, golden-haired infant, "and you needn't come back until I send for you, for I'm afraid Somebody has been seeing too much of you lately, anyhow. And I, myself, need a rest from your foolish chatter."

And Zenia went away smiling, sweet and innocent, as if she'd just had her hand kissed. But I said to myself that if there was as much of Taggart in her as I thought, she'd make Mrs. Peggy pay for such treatment if she ever got the whiphand. But to be fair I must admit that, at the time, how she was to get the whiphand never entered my mind.

As I explained my affair Mrs. Peggy listened with head propped on jewelled hand, her white hair lending her beauty that touch of softness she'd lacked until time took her in her turn.

When I had finished, "It seems strange," said she, "that you should ever come to me for advice." And I knew she was thinking of the day I last stood in that room, twenty-one years before, when she had tried to bend me from my trade.

"In my business," said I, "I stand or fall by my own judgment. When outside my line, I seek expert advice. I don't know how to make the kind of man Bill wants to be, though I know 'em on sight. My money will pay his board, the school will give him law, but for his outer coating, where is the brush?" It was on my tongue to amplify thus—that Bill wanted to be curried

and rubbed down till there should not be a loose Missouri hair to his hide; but when I looked about on the appointments of the room, I saw that was no fit place in which to drop my metaphor, so merely added: "I want it to be so that when people fall in his way, they will see skyscrapers and breathe Fifth Avenue."

She asked, "Do you mean for him to locate in New York City?"

"No; as I place it, that would be but to add one more paving-stone for the feet of the Easterners."

"And you expect him to spend summer vacations here at home?"

I shook my head. "Two months in Mizzouryville," said I, "would loosen all the nails they could drive abroad in ten months' time. I ask for him only at Christmas holidays, that I may note his progress, having him at concentrated gaze."

All this time Bill was doing himself and me the greatest service in his power; for he stood without one word, his eyes fixed, his body erect like the lady-statue on the corner pedestal though, of course, with more clothes. So well did Mrs. Peggy think of his silence—which she set down

to awe of her high state—that she was won completely over.

A week from that day Bill was embedded in the nest of a St. Louis family, the head of it a widow and none other than Mrs. Peggy Overstreet's sister. She had refused to speak to me ever since I built Horseshoe House, therefore was suitably high-minded, while having but sons for children, she offered no danger to Laidie's happiness.

XIV

The Modern Man Cannot Live Close to Nature—Even in the Garden of Eden There Came Up the Question of Clothes

SINCE that Christmas was too near at hand to break in upon Bill's development, it was the Christmas Eve following ere he stepped from the train into my arms, but from the hug he gave me I knew that as yet St. Louis had not scratched far below his surface.

"Jove! but it's good to be back home," he cried gaily, side-stepping to slap on the back our old station-master who bore it well considering how he despised to be touched, or even questioned. I was content. His "Jove"—a word that could no more thrive in the air of Mizzouryville than a banana-tree—was the word of Esau; but his heartiness was that of Jacob.

As I walked him homeward over the rattling

sidewalks (to show that however he'd educated himself to taxis and jitneys I was in my natural state of leg) I told him of the big dinner Laidie was to give us on the morrow, and he groaned at the prospect. For every year at Christmas time Laidie set us down to table with Taggart Gleason and wife because Dahlia—Taggart's wife—had been one of my pets since her infancy. This annual dinner was about the only enjoyment Taggart still permitted his wife, as I reminded Bill in reproving tones: and I went on to call to his mind how, ever since Dahlia, an orphan of three, had toddled through the shop door with her, "I love oo, Stick," she had ever come to me for advice in all her affairs—until, alas! her time of husband-getting.

Bill sighed. "Maybe Old Datty will let her come without him," he said, but not hopeful. "Has he done much drinking and blowing around since I left home?"

"He's drunk deep and blown loud. But after his sprees he's sane enough to know there's never been anything between Dahlia and Lane Laclede."

"Do you know, father," he said, easy and superior, "I've learned a good deal in the city about the pressure that drives husband and wife

apart, and I'm not so sure that Laclede—and Mrs. Gleason——"

I interrupted, dry, "And the minister is invited. You'll be sorry to hear, Bill, that Brother Wane's time with us is dubious; it seems the church machinery he's been at such pains to set up threatens to grind him to powder."

"Father, I wish you wouldn't call me 'Bill.'"

"Which?" said I, groping.

"William," he says, succinct. "It's 'William Attum' in the Bible and I prefer 'William' in the open."

I asked, short, "And do you want your last named changed to Molecule?"

He laughed and laughed till by-and-by I must needs smile, for I'd said something, and knew it. But I wouldn't cross him. There seemed more life in "Bill," and more art in "William," and of course naturalness was what he wished to outgrow. For after all is said, only savages do as they please—the closer a man is to nature, the less he cares who sees him put knife in mouth.

When we stood on the lawn closed in by the arms of Horseshoe House where we had once talked to the girl-out-of-the-common, I asked, ab-

rupt, and just like this, "Son, have you ever seen her?" (Call him "William," I wouldn't.)

He knew exactly whom I meant. "Never, father," says William—for so he must now be called, as say the books in my smokehouse when the hero turns out to be the duke's son. Then he added with an air so condescending that I was dumbfounded—"What a charming little thing she was! So unsophisticated, with her games and plays—ha, ha! Well, father, my city experience tells me that in spite of her wanderings, she was pure as gold. I'd like to meet her again. Jove!"

"Don't do that too often," said I, hasty. "Let's go in by the parlor-door." And having him that evening all to myself, I sounded him well, to find if my plummet would show a depth in his currents over my head. But as yet, no.

XV

No Matter How Young a Man May Feel, It's by His Looks That He Gets Measured

I DON'T think Laidie was ever busier than on the next day. To say nothing of acting hostess, she had to keep the resentment of her cook (who despised company) from bursting into flame, and she had to hide her deep affection for Dahlia, and aggrandize Taggart Gleason in order to keep him in a good humor. Miss Lindy—the cook—wouldn't open the door to guests, lest her spirit of independence catch cold in the draught, so it was Laidie who met us, all excitement, with cheeks bright-red—just the sort of roses to set off her fine raven hair. I was so moved at sight of her that I muttered to William, "Say 'Jove' if you want to!"

It was a turkey dinner with oyster dressing that Laidie had made herself—the gravy not thin and

whitish, nor greasy, though rich with giblets, and at the end of the long vista of good dishes there were mince and pumpkin pies, a slice of each to every man with no talk of which he preferred, and a glass of thick yellow cream alongside. But on that table everything tasted of Taggart Gleason. There he sat, cold and out of place, like a block of salt in the ice cream of our holiday.

At his side, poor Dahlia cowered, timid and dumb, her pretty young face composed in lines of dutiful submission; and the rest of us trembled behind our plates as he gave us Washington City in statistics. I had a brief hope that William after fifteen months in St. Louis might be backed up against this bore, but when I saw the lack-luster gaze in his eye, I knew my son had fallen under the old spell.

This Influence, this breath of Alaska, had so much to do with what happened that night, I cannot make too much of it—yet I hold my hand. For what boots it how carefully I round my tale if it be not read? Now, Taggart Gleason had been born in Washington City, therefore, as we supposed, had picked up his facts and figures with his own hands, whereas we had no connection with the place save to help send men there who

in return sent us packets of ill-advised garden-seeds.

William, indeed, made one attempt at our rescue. As Taggart closed his account of the Treasury Building and was about to lead us to the Patent Office, my son called on me to tell the anecdote of Curd Tooterflail and the red rooster. I have a store of anecdotes, all selected and tried as being good for more than one laugh, and William was proud of them. He loved to have me open up for the entertainment of friends and on state occasions would cry, "Now, father, tell about so-and-so"; and he would be the very first to smile. But when I caught Taggart's cold, hard-boiled eye, I knew I could never get the red rooster through with a feather to his tail, so shook my head.

"You referred to the Patent Office," says Brother Wane, patient—and I will say this for the minister, he was a man who turned the other cheek.

After dinner William, as guest of honor, was placed in a corner to be surfeited on data, while the minister hovered on the outskirts, and in this way, Dahlia was given a breath of freedom. We took her here and there, staying out of the room

as long as we dared, to breathe the snow-laden air. William knew if he failed to show deep interest, Taggart would look about for his wife and grow resentful toward us for trying to make her happy, so he stood to his duty; and as he sat under the Influence, his city surface began peeling off him till, by dusk, he seemed as small and pitiful as if he had crawled back on all-fours to his early boyhood.

Laidie's grandfather, in his Sunday suit cleaned and brushed by Laidie, passed a troubled day. B. had taken a mean advantage of her by clinging to his undershirt and such was its length of arm and dinginess of woolen wristlets that one or the other was constantly showing itself, causing me to think of his nicely starched cuffs as whited sepulchers full of what should have been buried. The efforts B. made to tuck back those soiled wristlets unbeknown to Taggart Gleason, were enough to bring on the second stroke, yet I knew he would take no lesson from his plight, age and sloth had that grip on his being.

Ah! With what alacrity we skipped to our feet when Brother Wane said if we didn't hurry we'd be late to services,—church always begins at seven of winter nights lest the dark catch us

amongst deceitful sidewalks with their pitfalls of missing planks.

"Stick," says Gleason, clinging to his easy chair, and all forgeful of our past differences over the Rockpile, "if you don't care to go to meeting——" And I sensed the Post Office with all its ramifications in the terrible memory of the man.

"But I am going," I gave cry, searching for my hat; now, at that moment, the organ in the meeting-house seemed to me no bigger than a flea. "But if my son——"

William melted through the door like a dissolving view in a lecture on Famous People I Have Met, and in the confusion of setting forth I heard a sly sound from the dining-room to tell me he and Laidie were each clapping a slice of cold turkey between the halves of biscuits, properly buttered, with a pickle as outrider. It made me hungry, not for food (Sunday evenings, I never take a morsel) but for the youth that seasoned those sandwiches, for the youth that quickened their steps as they darted down an alley toward the church, for the youth that made their eyes glow as they sat side by side on the back bench.

I might feel just that young, but no one would

believe it of me, seeing me so large and palpable. I took my seat where I hadn't sat for three years and as I looked at the organ I spoke to myself thus: If Taggart Gleason could drive me hither to hear a gum-chewing stripling churn wind for melody, with one note never still, it, although untouched, sounding forth no matter what other notes came and went—what might not William do, in his joy of escape? Laidie must appear to him as a dream of beauty and peace; and I felt sure that the reaction would land him safe and sound in the bonds of a formal engagement.

The main bulk of the singing was done by the choir, they looking down from the platform with disfavoring eye upon any in the congregation venturing to lift a timid voice, it being part of the church machinery for a group of youngsters to specialize on the hymns, whilst the rest sat at gaze. To-night, the young people being away at their festivities—for in another church-house there was a Christmas Tree—the choir was formed of true-hearted ladies of an age when spectacles do not come amiss yet are not publicly used, being regarded as monuments to departed youth. Therefore, conversant with their tunes, but seeing not their words, they lifted their voices

in smothered cries, as in distress. Laidie and William I could hear singing away in great force, and from them, occasionally, I got a key to the mystery in the forecastle—and, more than that, a key to their hearts, for well enough I knew what such singing betokened, call it "religion" if you will.

Brother Wane found himself in the strange case of facing a packed house, for all those not believing in a Christmas Tree on Sunday night had flocked to hear him. Anxious to offend no one of conflicting views, he was afraid to handle the Word of God lest it pierce a neighbor's opinion, so gave us a discourse on the Greatness of Man.

Flip (Laidie's dog) had followed Van Buren Hightower to church, though not discovered till found lying at ease by the old gentleman's feet, therefore not removed; for if Flip did not fall to scratching (his elbow pounding the floor like some housewife beating steak for breakfast) it were far better to endure the silent offensiveness of him than stop the sermon with his yelps. In such general terms did Brother Wane address us and so insufferably dull his droning, telling us that we had intellects and the like whereas ani-

mals are otherwise, that at last from my thought-tree a thought came sailing down like a leaf unduly ripe and like-enough of as little value—it was this: that however great man may be and however wideawake his intellect, I saw where Flip scored a point over him just then. For old Flip just lay there peaceful, never wrinkling his eyes except at such odd moments as B. remembered his wristlets and plucked them back, automatic.

But when, on the way home, I referred to the sermon as probably the last I should ever hear Brother Wane deliver——

"Why?" William exclaimed, rousing himself. "I thought it pretty good——" And he just from the city! I didn't say anything; I'd learned that from Jim Bob; but I knew what was coming——

"Father!" he laid his hand on my shoulder as we walked along. "It's settled; Laidie and I are to be married when I finish my studies." He went on, calm and superior-like: "She's a fine girl. She'd make any man a good wife. When a fellow starts out in life to win his way among strangers he couldn't do better than to have a sensible, capable girl like Laidie."

When we reached Horseshoe House I took a

good look at him as he lit the parlor lamp: just as cool as a cucumber, he was.

"Do you know," he smiled, "down there in St. Louis I got afraid that she might not fit into my scheme of life, don't you know."

"Then you should change your schemes," I told him, flat.

"Oh, I couldn't change that," he cried, hasty. "But it's all right. She'll fit in. She's such a substantial girl—just what I'll need. Well, it's settled: a year from next June it's to be, and in the meantime I won't have to bother my head about it. I'll just put the whole thing out of my mind; one can work to better advantage so. Of course I'll write to her—occasionally. I hate to write letters with nothing in 'em. Our wedding's to be exceedingly plain. And, father"—he smiled again—"we'll leave Taggart Gleason out of it."

"To my mind," I said, dry, "Old Datty ought to be the best man; he's done considerable to bring this thing about." He shrugged his shoulders; it was the first time I'd ever seen anybody do it, but I knew it at once by the books in the smokehouse.

Of course my meaning had gone clean over

his head. As to that, the full meaning of winning such a wonder as Laidie had been lost in air. William sat down before the fireplace as if expecting the backlog to crawl in from the woodpile to its own funeral pyre. When he presently saw me coming with the wood, up he jumped, prompt enough—it was simply that he had forgotten some of the old ways. He took it from me to place on the flames, and, finding soot on his hands, looked about, helpless. He may have been seeking a lavatory, I don't know. I paid no attention.

When the fire was dancing merrily we settled back in our chairs, and how we did talk! And wonderful things he related. But none of them seemed to me so wonderful as his sitting there fairly bursting with interest in his own affairs, and Laidie quite forgotten—not even a remorseful twinge left because he had chosen me for his night's companion, leaving Laidie to go home from church with her grandfather and the dog. It wasn't so much that he failed to realize his tremendous good fortune, but that he couldn't have been made to understand the sadness of his spiritual lack.

At one time my mind showed itself so far

afield that he brought up, reproachful, with—"What are you thinking about, father?"

"Flip," said I.

It was about an hour later—the clock had just struck eleven—when we were startled by running footsteps on our yard-path. Something fell against the door, giving it a jar that made the knob rattle; then I recognized Dahlia Gleason's voice, high and strained—

"Let me in, Stick—let me in—oh, let me in!"—just as, in the old days, she used to run to me with each fresh hurt.

But well I knew, before I could get to the door, that something had befallen that night not to be soothed away by the touch of a friend's hand.

XVI

You Can't See Far Below a Man's Surface When His Sky Is Flooded with Sunshine

AS soon as I let her through the door she pushed it shut and stood with her back against it, but being out of breath from running and weak from fright, she would have fallen if I had not caught her in my arms. "He'll kill me if he gets to me," was all she said.

William's face went dark as he sprang to the door. I eased her to a chair and we waited with held breath, not looking at each other, and somewhere a dog began howling—an unearthly sound in the icebound night, to make one's flesh creep.

This was the first time Taggart Gleason, in drunken fury, had ever driven his wife out of doors, and not knowing it was to be the last, I felt black anger against the smooth-faced tyrant, who, a few hours earlier, had been so soft of

voice and flabby of hand. While we waited in silence for I did not know what, a shot rang out, as startling in the dead stillness as the sting of a knifeblade, and a cry followed shrill and quavering, losing itself in the dog's howl.

Then William and I looked at each other, but neither at Dahlia, who, but for her tightened grip on my arm, gave no sign of having heard.

Down the street, windows were flung up, and hoarse voices mingled with the upper notes of excited women. Then some one ran across our yard, stumbling through the newly-fallen snow that edged the path, and beat upon the door.

"Open this door!" You would have thought us guilty of some crime for having it shut.

Dahlia murmured with a shiver, "It's Zenia."

At that William drew it open and Taggart's daughter rushed in, her face like the snowdrift, but her eyes like the blaze on the hearth. Her bosom was heaving with emotion so violent that it made her seem larger, somehow, because she was small of bone, and gave a greater force to her small face because it was framed in the gold of her picture-hair. And the feeling I'd always held that she was like a doll faded forever as she cried out—

"Father's dead—he's been murdered. . . . You can go home, *now,* mother—and be happy!" She looked at her stepmother as if minded to strike her in the face, and Dahlia fell back as if she had been struck.

I've often sat and thought of suitable words that might have been flung back at the grief-crazed girl, and I reckon I've gathered as many as a bushel. But at the time of need all grew too high for my reach, so I could only look at her, stricken dumb. Then out of the door she flung, and we could hear her rushing through the street—right down the middle of the road through snow and all—screaming that her father had been murdered.

"For God's sake don't let the murderer escape," we heard her cry. "Take him with the blood on his hands——" And other words too dreadful from a young girl's lips.

But I've always been glad I heard her that night calling for a rope around Lane Laclede's neck, for I'd never have understood her, else. For you can't know people if seen only in calm weather, for depth of character must be measured by the stress of one's passionate hour; and in that hour I learned that Zenia Gleason crying

for revenge was stronger than Dahlia fainting in her chair.

Like a flash William had sped away to send me help and here came Laidie like a breeze off a rose-garden—and maybe I didn't breath her deep! For a minute life had seemed to stop dead still, but at sight of her eyes it went right on ticking. She took Dahlia in her capable hands, being free to minister to her as one woman with another, I having been baffled by the mystery of sex, and some good time lost.

After I had lifted her to bed and Laidie had nodded my release, away I darted, meaning to get to the marrow of the matter and suck it to the dry bone. But just as I grabbed the top of the back fence to vault over, I was brought up stockstill by footsteps running toward me from the alley that leads across from the shop. Somebody stopped, breathing hard, and then a voice—

"Is that you, Stick?"

Although it was so dark—nothing but snow-light—and although I had heard that voice but a few times and had thought never to hear it again, I didn't have to ask who she was. It was the girl-out-of-the-common, she who had left her name at home.

XVII

A Man Is Like to Starve When Waiting for the Ravens to Feed Him, Unless He Has Fat of His Own to Draw On

I WAS spellbound, but it took her a mighty short time to lift the spell.

"Stick, if they find Lane Laclede they'll hang him sure——" She spoke as if she'd been among our people all her life. "He must be kept out of sight, for Taggart Gleason's daughter has set the whole town crazy. The truth of the killing will never be known—they'll not listen to one word while they're in their red mood—not if they come across him to-night. That girl just runs from street to street, her hair streaming and her eyes——"

"Do you mean to tell me Lane Laclede has run away? He'd never do it!" I was so taken out of myself by her words that I made nothing

of my surprise at finding her at my back gate.

She spoke so fast that her voice reminded me of wind running over dead leaves. "He gave himself up to the sheriff as soon as it happened, but the sheriff doesn't dare take him to the jail —the mob would break it open and murder the prisoner. You must help, Stick, and there isn't a second to lose, either."

I climbed over the fence. Leap it I couldn't, for I hadn't enough spirit in my legs just then to have jumped me over a blade of grass. She drew me along back up the alley. I followed without a word, for when I have no plan of my own, I go with one who has till I find where it leads. We could hardly see, for the snow was only like a sort of pale lining to the velvet darkness of the night, but she knew the way to the rear of the shop as well as I did. It was cold enough to stiffen the snow, but the crunching of our feet passed unheard because of the wild excitement on Main Street—so presently we were safe inside the back-end of the blacksmith shop without the neighbors being any the wiser.

Here in the inky darkness we found the sheriff —Cadwitch Beam was just as incompetent as by daylight, not having been lifted to a man's size

by the night's crisis, but crouching against the workbench as one waiting for the ravens to come to feed him, though himself no Elijah.

In a breath I learned the state of affairs: by the sheriff's advice, Lane Laclede had slipped out of town, purposing to conceal himself in my cottage down at the Mineral Springs (three miles distant), there to wait for the officer. It was Cadwitch Beam's intention to carry him thence by stealth to the next county jail, for it was known that Lane had given himself up, and it was just as important in the meantime that one of them should be kept hidden as the other; for if the mob, egged on by Zenia Gleason, found Cad, they would soon pry open his mouth.

In the meantime, William had gone for horses for Cadwitch, himself and myself, we latter as sheriff's deputies, that we might reach the cottage and take Laclede. And it was very strange, waiting there in the stillness of the shop whose familiar smells all seemed unfamiliar, trying to think of a way out of the day's tangle—and wondering what William had said to the girl-out-of-the-common, when they met.

XVIII

Rob a Man of His Chance, and No One Can Say What He Would Have Done

IN a very short time a signal at the big door warned us to open it without noise. William rode in, slipped to the ground, gave the bridle to me and his hand to the girl-out-of-the-common. She thought it wonderful that he should be able to pick up beast and saddle and ride through town unsuspected, and was not backward with her words, praising him as heartily as she did everything, and making as much of him as of me.

Three times he came with a saddled horse and each time he had her hand to clasp, so at the third horse I cried enough.

"One more, Stick," says the girl, with a tease in her voice, "the Unintended is going along with you." And she explained that there must be an extra horse for Laclede to ride when Cad and

Bill took him to the next county. "And as for you," said she, "you and I will ride back double, unless you make me walk."

"You see, father," says William, eager, "if we led along the horse for Lane, its saddle empty, people would know in a minute what's up; but if *she* rides it, nobody'll suspect that we're going for the prisoner."

"It's not to be thought of," I told them. "This is men's business and there was never a girl yet —except those in the books in the smokehouse— who could play a man's part."

"Father," says William, "it's evident we can't lead an empty saddle out of this shop, so the young lady will have to go with us. But as to her coming back, if you think you'd be too heavy to ride with her double, you can go on with Cad and Lane, and *I'll* come back home with the young lady, riding double."

Of course I told him there should be no such thing; and as soon as he had gone after the fourth horse I turned upon the girl in no peaceful mood with, "When did you come to town, and why are you here? Does your uncle know of this?"

She didn't want to tell me, so said that if we conversed our voices might be overheard by the

searchers. She was right; and when one is in the right and at the same time is having one's own way, no amount of arguing is going to put him in the wrong.

When the fourth horse came, we mounted, for though it would have been safer on other counts to wait under cover till the mob had scattered, we knew a neigh or whinney would bring people to the door. William rode with Cad Beam down the alley past Horseshoe House, under the railroad trestle and by the old mill to the outskirts of town, while I with the Unintended cut right across Main Street. I planted myself well-rooted in the public eye, calling out lustily that I was looking for Lane Laclede and was determined to get him. There were curious glances at my companion, but she, all in black with head well hidden, was supposed to be Mrs. Taggart Gleason, since everybody knew Dahlia had always been one of my pets. Just west of the far depot the four of us came together and galloped along the Browntown road, that if we be observed, our destination might not be guessed.

I had nothing to say to the girl as we sent the snow flying behind us, and William, heavy at having to ride beside the sheriff, wouldn't open

his mouth, so for about a mile we were speechless. And we were just nearing the branch road which would take us in a roundabout way to the south road leading to the Springs, when we heard hoofbeats other than our own, and found ourselves being hotly pursued.

I fell back to shout to Cad: "It's McFeeter's mare!" Plunging ahead, we looked keenly about for cover, knowing we couldn't keep ahead of that racer, for there was no animal in the county the equal of McFeeter's mare, and that is why Mrs. McFeeter made him sell it. Having been bought by Richard Purly, it was but fair to guess that the assistant cashier was even now upon its back, as violent to capture Laclede as he had been to buy the Rockpile.

Pretty soon William called: "There's more than one!" True; behind the racer came a second, and behind the second, others. Afterwards we learned that Zenia, seeing me and the Unintended, had suspected the truth, and had sent the fleetest to overhaul us. Whether or not she thought the black dressed figure on horseback her stepmother, she believed the enterprise under way meant the rescue of Laclede.

On either side of the road rose high banks

that continued so far we dared not hold to the road, so we took the steep at a run meaning to hide in the woods; for here ran an arm of Midway Forest in which Giles Flitterfled once succeeded in hiding from the whole county. Cadwitch Beam, finding he couldn't make his horse climb, slipped off and scrambled up after us, leaving his sorrel snorting in the snowdrift to call attention to our whereabouts.

"Well," said I, very angry, when he dashed among the trees to where I waited with the Unintended safely screened from view, "well, Man-Ostrich, how do you do!"

William gave me his bridle to hold, and off he jumped, and I knew that once he had Cad's horse between his legs the old sorrel would come up that wall like a fly. But when he had him up so much good time had been lost that he was espied by Richard Purly, dark though it was, before he could get behind the snow-laden trees. Purly, on his racer, took the bank like the swift opening of scissor-blades, crying for us to give up Lane Laclede.

William called to me in that underground tone that always gave warning something was about to happen—"Sit tight!" And we retreated far-

ther back in the woods. I never knew what he did to Richard Purly; I never felt curious enough to ask him, and Purly never volunteered the information; whatever it was, it made Purly his enemy for life, but not a dangerous enemy. At any rate, William kept him perfectly silent till his companions, thinking he'd raced on along the west road, passed us on their course to Browntown.

After that we didn't draw rein till we reached the bridge over Midway Creek on the south road. Here at our slowing up, William, by some device, brought himself alongside the Unintended and in spite of all I could do, kept with her, knee to knee, the rest of the journey, so that I must needs ride ahead with Cad. From time to time, I could hear their voices, not swung in minor chords to harmonize with the night's tragedy, but ringing clear and free like soaring bird-notes. Ah, well, it's youth for wings to keep in air when troubles are laying snares for lagging feet—old age may hop with a brave heart, but must hop on the ground. What could those two have found to talk about? Cad and I were like deaf-mutes.

I judged that by the time we reached the

Springs cottage, William and his Unintended would be better acquainted than if they had belonged a week to the same singing class at any one of our seven churches; and the way he lifted her from her horse at the journey's end put a seal on my judgment. It confused me to have their friendship developing before my eyes at the very time I should have been free to give all my thoughts to Laclede's plight; for having tethered our horses and crept into the unfurnished cottage with only the snow-light to show palely at staring windows, I felt numbed to Laclede's sorrow from thinking of the danger to Laidie's peace of mind.

He was walking up and down the bare floor when we went in, and he never stood still a moment after that. We couldn't see each other distinctly, of course, and yet I perceived somehow that Lane Laclede was an altered man. The old-time good-natured and easy going slackness of our handsome young citizen was gone, and, unless I was very much mistaken, would never return.

"I didn't mean to kill him," he jerked out the words. "He said he'd have my life. . . . I wish to God he had."

Cadwitch broke in: "Don't commit yourself, Lane; don't make a statement."

"I just happened to be passing his house," Lane paid him no attention; "I often go by that house —I used to board there, you know. I wasn't thinking about anything especially—and Dahlia came running out of the door; well, yes, I had been thinking about her, a little. So somehow I didn't seem surprised. But in a second I saw that she was scared half to death, and there was a man behind her with a hatchet and he was crazy-drunk. It was Taggart. 'You stand there,' I said to him—and he stood there. It must have been something in the way I spoke, I guess, for I remember I was surprised when he stopped. I was afraid he'd rush past me. Dahlia ran on, never looking back. Then he said he'd have my life. And he started to throw the hatchet at my head. That is, I thought he made a movement to throw it. He did make the movement, but it might have been just to bluff me. He might never have thrown it at me, after all. Do you think he would have, Stick? You knew him pretty well—do you think he would have?"

Cadwitch cried out, "There shouldn't be a word of all this. I'm bound to report all that I hear."

"I don't care what happens to me," Lane went on in his lifeless tones. "I'd have let the fellows take me and do what they pleased, only—it would break Dahlia's heart for me to die that way. She'd want me to have fair play. I'm not caring. I felt sure he meant to split my head open with the hatchet, but that wasn't what made me do it. Of a sudden it came over me what Dahlia had endured all these years, only to be driven out of her house at last. It was too big for me. I just shot him down where he stood. I aimed at his heart, and I shot him through the heart."

"Come!" cried the sheriff, rough and hard-set, "we must get out of this before the boys follow our tracks."

Lane grasped my arm and tried to make out the expression on my face. I was glad it was dark, and I tried as hard as ever I tried anything in my life to keep from the least shrinking under his touch. He said: "I told myself, *'I'll kill the hell-hound!'* I never dreamed I could feel as I did—such raging hate! And the next thing I knew he was dead with his blood all over the snow—and I didn't hate him. I had no more feeling for him than for one of the bare trees. Except—to wish that it had been the other way—with me

on the ground and him to walk away—and hide. If Taggart was alive now—my God!" But he didn't cry out the words, just spoke them one like the other, slow and flat.

The Unintended spoke, very quiet and soothing: "Suppose he were alive, Lane, and you saw him strike Dahlia?"

There was a wild flare in his voice: "I'd do it again!"

When Cadwitch and William had taken him away, I was for dragging in a wornout stove from the rubbish pile of the last tenant, for it had grown colder. But the girl wouldn't hear to it and presently we were riding double back to town. We didn't talk at first, for her manner of parting from William had not left a word on my tongue. Her first speech was about Lane Laclede—

"It's made a man of him!"

I said, "Never a happy man, to his dying day."

She caught me up with, "What of that? Life has nobler gifts to offer than happiness."

After awhile I asked, "Did Bill tell you of his engagement to Laidie?"

"Yes, he told me everything." Her voice was

very soft. She laughed a little, breaking off with a curious sound in her throat. Then she drew her horse closer so she could pat my arm, murmuring, "Never fear, Stick—I'm just his dear Unintended. Bill's a real man, too; he's not wavering."

After crossing the red bridge we took a seldom-used road back to town, and on the way she explained her presence in Mizzouryville. Learning from the county paper—to which she was now a subscriber—that William was expected home from city training, and being eager to see how well he had progressed, she had yielded to the lust of adventure, hoping to pass the night at Dahlia Gleason's. Knowing both Taggart and his daughter would make objections, she hoped to gain Dahlia's private ear and be stowed away until early morning in the room she had once occupied, with the rest of the family none the wiser. Zenia was spending Christmas day with Mrs. Peggy Overstreet, serving as a sort of upper servant to help entertain Mrs. Peggy's house party of high champaign people from Kansas City. Taggart, after his big dinner at Van Buren Hightower's, had ensconsed himself in the rear of Walrus's drugstore—for, since

our last election, Santa Claus was afraid to bring whisky down a front chimney. Mrs. Gleason, being thus to herself when the Unintended called, agreed to the plan not only because of real liking for the girl, but from horror at the thought of her being without shelter through the winter night.

All might have gone well had not Mrs. Peggy, tiring of Zenia, sent her home earlier than expected; whereupon Zenia, in spiteful mood, stopped at the drugstore to force her father from his flowing cups. On reaching home in confusion, the guest's presence was discovered, and the sight of her caused the drunken man to remember the true words she had once cast in his teeth. I have always believed Taggart would have killed his wife had not Lane Laclede happened along.

"And what's to become of you?" I asked my little friend as we entered town. I believed Horseshoe House filled with women gathered about Dahlia; but had it been empty it would have been still less suitable for sheltering a young girl. I felt keenly her folly in venturing out of her uncle's ken, but said no more on that head, deeming it sufficient punishment for her to re-

flect that had she stayed at home, the killing might never have taken place.

"I'm going away on the midnight freight," she presently answered; "for I've got what I came for," she added soft and low.

I didn't ask what William had given her—I was afraid. So without words we rode to the far depot, and walked the platform when the red-hot stove drove us out of doors, and listened to the singing of the telegraph-wires, and watched where the roads had pushed their bare black arms through the snow.

She was the only passenger to board the train. "Take care of her, Jim," I said to the brakeman, "she's worth lots more than she knows." She knew mighty well what I meant, and gave me a smile, slow and wistful.

The last I saw, she was standing on the rear platform of the caboose, a slight black muffled figure, with the gleam from the green lantern palely touching her cheek, and showing the wide sweep of her arm as she waved good-by.

XIX

You May Live and Die in the Best Set of This World with No Assurance of Getting into the Upper Circles of the Next

OF my parting from the Unintended I made for William but a brief tale, after which she was not mentioned between us till he went back to his city hothouse to be forced to early flowering. But there was so much noise over the murder that one scarcely noticed if one or more keys on the organ went mute. Mizzoury-ville had not known a tragedy since the Civil War, and when what you read in the papers comes to your very door, it makes you a foreigner to yourself. That's why the mob, driven mad by Zenia's thirst for vengeance, sought Lane Laclede the whole night through, swearing he must be hung to the nearest tree—yet at sunrise there wasn't a man in town who would have

harmed a hair of his head. The very men who had been fierce to stretch his neck now wanted to grip his hand.

In safe time he came back and stood his trial with credit, coming out a bigger man than when he went in. We had all liked Lane, but as he'd ever taken himself at very modest value, and as a man should know best about himself, he had been set down as worth that much and no more. But now people thought a great deal more of his life because he'd killed a man to save it.

When William was gone, and after all that could be said about Taggart's death and Lane's trial had been hashed up so often that there was no taste left to the gravy, I began to be terribly lonesome. More than fifteen months I had lived alone, and though friends came in and out, some to borrow, never returning, and others dividing loafing-time between me and the Bench—it wasn't the same as if William had been there. Just to have had the bulk of him at his anvil would have cheered me more than a dozen clacking tongues at the door. At first it was bitter hard to accept the truth that this was never again to be; but if I must wear a yoke that doesn't fit, I try to square my shoulders to it as best I can.

Therefore, seeing how it was like to be with me the rest of my days, I began casting my eyes abroad. First, I went straight to Laidie's grandfather's to engage three meals a day (but only two of Sundays); they needed the income, and now that William was as good as a man of the house, I had, of course, a kinsman's footing there. Second, to town I went and bought the highest priced—and I presume the best—suit of clothes in Mizzouryville, tailor-made; and thus accoutered I stepped into the barbershop to bid my beard farewell. Third, I went to the Laclede Grocery.

Where the Bench had stood all summer was drifted snow, but well enough I knew it was to be found behind the hot stove in the back-end, with the old men on it, their overcoats steaming. Sure enough, there were Van Buren Hightower, who didn't speak, as I'd seen him once before that day, and Captain Little Dave Overstreet and Jim Bob Peterson; also Curd Tooterflail who had fallen heir to poor Taggart's place. And listening to their tales of dead old settlers was Lane Laclede with his wistful smile and that sudden occasional jerk of the arm I'd never noticed till just lately.

Knowing that what I dropped there would soon sprout up through every way and byway of the village, I said, succinct, that I was casting my eyes abroad, and that by Christmas following I expected to be a married man. Though I spoke in jest, they were not so blinded by my wit as to lose sight of my meaning, and Jim Bob, meaning to rise to the subtlety of it, leapt up as if to dance nimbly to the festive idea. He would have capered like a boy but rheumatism took him, so that he only lifted one leg and was glad enough to sit down again.

Leaving it to work, I went home, and constantly wore my best clothes when upon the street, and was at every church dinner and bazaar. Presently I found myself invited to little gatherings and became once more a man of note, I having been accepted during the solitary months of my home cooking and laundry work, as a family horse turned out to die. It had ceased to occur to my best friends—always except B. and Laidie—to invite me to their spreads, I being set down, like enough, as too old to care for fried chicken and jollity; but now I was placed on the lists of the very strangers within our gates.

But it's one thing to decide to marry and a different one to find the woman. There were faces that pleased and voices that soothed, but whenever I thought of accepting any particular hand and placing my broom in it, so well bulwarked was I by experience with William's poor mother, that broom swept out of my brain all prospects of a peaceful future. So the summer left me unsuited, though hard sought after, as having a good house, a good business, and money in the bank.

That summer was memorable for my sale of the Mineral Springs property to Big Dave Overstreet. It had always been a burden to me, the rent never paid except the first month's advance, the tenants continually breaking up my fencing or snatching the very lathes off the walls in desperation of winter coldness and perennial sloth. Now, Big Dave was buying up the half-dozen huts and cottages thereabouts to turn a penny by the rents, believing he could make tenants pay, knowing himself hard and capable, and knowing they would more readily yield up their money to a man already rich. I felt my conscience free in thus ridding myself of the incubus, for I knew Big Dave Overstreet would never part with the

land to any Improvement Company—but I didn't look far enough ahead.

Mrs. Patty had died that spring; yes, had left the best set in Mizzouryville for a less fashionable circle in the other world. She was not old, she had no chronic complaint, and if anything but silk got next to her skin it was because she preferred satin. I grieved for her sincerely as knowing her to be so well suited in this world, and hardly to have given thought to picking out her place over yonder. And Big Dave was so loud of grief, so sure his heart was broken—well, he hypnotized me. But when I heard, the week after I sold him the Springs land—three months after his wife's death—that he'd married Zenia Gleason, I foresaw just how things would turn out.

Nothing had ever gotten the better of Big Dave until that year. Farm hands who idled on other farms lost flesh on his. If the corn-crop was poor, he'd staked all his chances on wheat, and when the cattle market was high he was ready to sell. He could squeeze water out of the bottom of a dry well. Mrs. Patty's death was his first big jolt, but he soon found himself in the running with a wife twice as young as his first, the prettiest blond in the county—

took her right away from his nephew. And as between the green lankness of poor Lanky and the old age of Big Dave, I saw where Zenia was wise.

But that fall Big Dave met something he couldn't turn out of doors, something he couldn't cut on the price. And shortly after the funeral, which came three days after his fall from the McFeeter mare, it grew current that all his property was in his wife's name, therefore safe from lawyer's toll. Then came the dreadful news that the young widow had sold the Mineral Springs and adjoining territory to Richard Purly. I dare say she looked upon it as a pious act to finish the work her father had begun; and she knew it would harass her stepmother; and I don't know which makes you feel the more religious—to carry out a loved one's wishes or to give a prod to somebody you deem at fault.

Days followed that I cannot recall without distress of mind. Well do I know that our Mineral Springs boom is of interest too local to make wide appeal, but one or two items concerning it must be set forth, else I might as well empty out my ink and give place to the books of other men.

A boom started—a quick growth on stony ground with no chance for the taproot to strike downward. Transfer of land always creates a stir amongst us, being unsettling to our minds, and now followed fast the report that the College had been sold—to whom, no one could find out, for the owners had recorded the deed as the sole property of Jim Bob Peterson, having learned, no doubt, his fixed principle, I mean that of not talking. Ostensibly, the College now belonged to Jim Bob, though every one knew he had nothing but his rundown farm and his seat on the Bench. Also, talk of a new railroad began to float about our heads, and it was whispered that the College would be the depot. Like a snake warmed out of torpor the old waterworks proposition came to life, and the hue and cry about building a new high school was reborn. And those who had replaced their wooden sidewalks with granitoid agitated the idea of forcing the more conservative to follow suit. On Thanksgiving Day, Lancaster Overstreet, with a new sweetheart by his side, came into town in his shiny new automobile, driving it himself. It was the first auto ever to enter our town except those of strangers, and it made a noise and a

smell that scared every horse along Main Street so that it was at least an hour before a team of mules could be got close enough to haul it to Lanky's woodhouse, now his garage (it having gone dead before the courthouse and impeding traffic).

In consequence of this turbulent state of affairs, Mizzouryville found itself divided into two parties, one opposed to enlargement, the other craving an influx of strangers. Old-time friends ceased speaking, though as to that, we seldom speak when we meet unless with something to say, even if friendly—which as a rule we are not to any great extent. On the other hand, people with the same idea of "civic improvement" were drawn close together, even if a church quarrel had kept them at bitter odds for years—the fire burning as hot as at the beginning though like enough it had forgotten the kindling that started it.

Of course, as Christmas grew on, I had another interest besides fighting so-called "improvement"—the return of William. His letters had grown far between, but were still affectionate to me and polite to Laidie, and by comparing them we kept track of his movements, though far in

his rear. From the amount of work he turned out, we grew fearful for his health.

But when I laid eyes on him, at the station, I perceived that his trouble was only of the mind. There was a six-inch snow on the ground, and as much, of course, on the sidewalks, there being an ordinance touching its removal, but always a street commissioner with a strong pull on the courthouse gang and a wide slackness in his work for the public.

William plowed along through the drifts never choosing the best way, and his tone of voice showed he didn't care how deep he got in. "Father, there's a matter to be settled before I can sleep."

"In good time, son——" For his voice called for a bright lamp on the table and all my eyes on guard. I didn't know what was amiss, but something darted through my mind giving the same thrilling shock I'd experienced on hearing that the College was sold. He was in a hurry to "tell his story," as say the books in the smokehouse, but I wouldn't hear a word till the fire was built up in the parlor with the curtains drawn, the lamp set in the midst of my Christmas presents, and easy chairs pulled close together.

Then, instead of making a beginning, he raised between himself and his trouble a pretended interest in my presents—the pretty razor made to catch the eye and pull the hair—and divers ornamental booklets like "The Psalm of Life," set forth in wavery letters hard to read, a picture here and there, and no new matter.

We talked for a time about these gifts in the manner of men holding bad news out the door. The year previous I had been given not so much as the wrappings of my little finger, for a contagion had spread of giving only to the very poor. Having, therefore, hunted out the few shiftless, good-for-nothing families which, according to prophecy, we've always had with us, upon their dazed and tousled heads were poured the blessings of the holiday season—and not so much as a "Merry Christmas!" to a man with two coats. But now since I had begun to cast my eyes abroad it was with me otherwise.

William paid little heed, but my feeling of coming disappointment faded in satisfaction over his face and form and city bearing. Already he was as much at odds with the young blades of Mizzouryville as would have been the Eads Bridge swung across Midway Creek. I named

him a success. Just as a city is larger than a village, so a city-man should be larger than a countryman if he make any display on the horizon of other men's minds. And William was already too big for our town though like-enough not yet big enough for New York.

"Father!——"

Then I knew it was coming.

But it came hard. "Father, I must tell you something before I sleep . . . it's going to be difficult for you to grasp it . . . very difficult."

There came the same shock that had thrilled me on our way from the depot though up till then if I'd had nerves I'd never known it. And in a flash I saw that the one thing I would not let myself think, the only thing that ought not to happen, was about to be put into spoken words.

XX

Bend Your Energies to Getting All You Can Out of Life, and There'll Be Mighty Small Leavings for Somebody Else

AS I sat speechless, William tried again, desperate: "It's about Laidie. I——" He couldn't say it with my eyes on his, and began to walk about the room.

"William, I'm afraid you've always stopped right there."

He checked himself to ask my meaning.

"I mean with your *'I.'* 'I' has always come first in your affair, hasn't it, William?"

And I gave him his choice of names, grim enough.

He walked back and forth. "Perhaps so." He moved about. "And shouldn't it come first, when it's a matter of life and death?" A minute later: "It's self-defense, it's a law of nature."

"A gentleman defends his wife first of all."

"I shall never have a wife."

At that my blood burned, and I was upon my feet. "Then you are no gentleman," I said.

"Father!" He was as pale as a living man can be.

But I went on: "You'll find that what we in the country call dishonor is called dishonor in the town." I didn't raise my voice; it sunk lower and lower till it sounded like that of a strange man. "When one breaks his word, his character is forever after nothing but a shattered pane of glass." I think I fell back in my chair then, though it may have been later. Not a muscle of his face moved. I think he kept walking about. We were silent for about half an hour, it seemed, though it may not have been five minutes.

The flames of the fireplace were so cheerful on this, the most cheerful season of the year, but their glow only made the heart-shadows darker.

"I'll never be able to look Laidie in the face," I heard myself saying. "Nor anybody else. The men in the shop. The boys on the Bench."

No answer. I think he did not hear.

After a time: "Have you written of your

changed mind to Laidie——" And my voice broke at all that the dear name stood for.

He answered, low and constrained, "I've waited to tell her face-to-face. I realize that I don't love Laidie and never have; and never can."

"What's the name of the girl that taught you this?"

"I told her good-by at the Springs; I've never seen her since, or heard of her, and I don't know her name, or how to go to her. I suppose we'll never meet again. But I learned from her that love doesn't mean Laidie."

"You care nothing about breaking her heart?"

"Hers isn't the kind that's broken. But this is what I mean to do, father—explain just how I feel, then, if she's willing, go ahead with it. That'll break *my* heart all right, but nobody'll hear me murmur——" And he clenched his fists.

Never had I spoken to him as on that night, but something within urged me to strike still harder blows; a curious feeling I had, and dreadful, as if I'd breathed flames to the bottom of my lungs. I know I was standing at last, for I remember we looked at each other with our eyes on a level, and about us a great stillness. It was

hard for me to realize that he was no longer a boy. But with that white face turned upon me, I stumbled to the truth that here was a man who must choose his own courses and sign his own checks on life's bank, to draw out, from time to time, only such as he had put into it with his own hands.

Suddenly I saw everything different. This was no longer our home, but mine; and his marrying or not marrying was not our future happiness or sorrow, but his, his alone for all time. My young bird, wings grown strong, would not take so much as a straw from the parent-nest to use in making his own.

It was William who broke the deathlike stillness: "Father, under the circumstances, this is the only honorable thing to do: tell her I don't love her and leave it in her hands. Surely you will agree to this?"

"Under the circumstances—yes." I had to say it.

There came a yearning look in his eyes. "Father, I think any son of yours after passing all his life with you, must be a gentleman."

"At any rate," I made answer, "you have proved yourself one." And until we went to bed,

we sat before the hearth in deep silence, broken only when I rose to put wood on the fire. From his set face I knew he would tell Laidie on the morrow. Well, there's a good deal in knowing a thing simply has to be—it takes the springs from under the bed and you know before you lie down that you're going to lie flat. My bitterness was gone though not my sorrow; yet even that sorrow was slowly mellowed like a black cloud when the sun begins boring its way through. For however much a man to *himself,* here sat my boy; and however headstrong, he'd been away twelve months and would soon be gone again.

The clock struck.

"It's nine," I had to tell him, for, fresh from city ways, he thought like enough that the evening was but begun.

He gave a start and drew a long breath, then turned. And when he saw my face a mist sprang to his eyes, and his mouth trembled ever so slightly.

I reached him my hand; all I said was—"Bill!"

And then he told me that he loved me as much as ever although I had spoken cruel words. And he said he was sorry to hurt me, but felt it his duty. And he promised that after this great

trouble was settled, life should be as peaceful and happy for me as he could make it.

All this he told me, though not one word did he speak—just said it by the grip of his hand. Seemed like we couldn't bear any sort of conversation then except mind-talk. So, still holding each other's hands, we rose. I walked with him to his old room to make sure he had everything he needed—as if I hadn't seen to all a dozen times that day!—and coming softly back, I covered over the fire.

The ashes left a small hole at the top so all the air wouldn't be excluded, and when I had taken the lamp to my room and slipped back to see that all was trim for morning, a tiny gleam came out of the blackness showing the shadowy forms of the two chairs before the hearth and a bit of the glass cover of the clock. Even so was the darkness of the future somewhat relieved. Whatever happened, my boy still loved me. I had seen it by something not often seen in a man's eyes; I had felt it in the crushing grip of his hand when I called him "Bill."

XXI

Though We Sing and Dance in the Light, Then Pass Away, Other Voices Will Catch Our Songs, and Our Children Will Love the Sunshine on the Grass

DURING William's stay I had arranged to have our meals at home; but it was little we sat down to, the next morning, for I could not think of cooking as I went heavily about the early tasks. All the joy was taken out of the glad day; in a sort of dumb misery William followed me here and there to get what warmth of cheer there might be from the closeness of my presence.

The snow was so deep that paths were to be dug from door to gate and crosswise to the henhouse where all the chickens were huddled with necks drawn down amongst the feathers. The coalhouse, too, must needs be opened up. But

as William and I worked at the snow shovels there was no shouting back and forth, and such neighbors as passed with merry calls got small comfort from either of us.

At last I called on him to desist, knowing that the more heated and full of life he became the harder would presently be his fall; for if a great sorrow be ahead, the friend who meanwhile makes you smile does you no good turn—for it's not grief but the shock that breaks a man.

When we set forth for the Christmas dinner at Laidie's, I thought we'd have borne ourselves much the same if going to her funeral. At the cottage, Van Buren met us with idle talk about our coming at a "fashionable hour," meaning we were late—thus trying to be suave and light of tongue despite a shirt-bosom to prove he'd dressed before Laidie was up. She met William with a pretty blush and hesitation, he showing just as much hesitation, but holding his head stiff and uncomfortable.

His part was hard to play because she noticed nothing amiss. Laidie was too practical to be watching how heads were held when there was a big dinner to serve and a cook unwilling to bear a hand. I don't think she took a good look at

him till we were seated at table, then laughed about his having studied too hard.

"It's not that," says William, reminding me of himself at seven years of age when if out of sorts he wanted me always to know the real reason so he could have what he wanted.

I said, in rebuke, "He needs Taggart Gleason to come back from the other world to cheer him up." There were other times for his heart-secrets, but no other hour for that steaming turkey and bronzed potato-volcano and old country ham and slaw with its slices of boiled egg cooked to dry mealiness, not of that damp gluey yellow found in all slaw that ever I saw unless made by Laidie. Working our way through dinner, I talked a good deal, describing the hubbub over so-called "town improvement"; and Van Buren, who had heard of a new sale of land told it again and again, the louder because I hadn't heard the news, so that William's silence was not remarked.

He brought himself sharply to the fore by suddenly lifting his head to ask:

"Didn't Lane Laclede get married?" And as Lane Laclede had nothing to do with our conversation we knew his mind had been afield ever since I'd mentioned Taggart Gleason's name.

"Son," I reproved him, "such a question can mean only one thing, and I take it ill-advised of you to drag Bank Corner gossip to the table."

"I only asked," cried William, ready to fight about the first thing at hand, "if Lane Laclede is married. Of course if it's a secret, I've no more to say."

"I've known Dahlia from a child at knee," I told him with warmth. "The sweetest little girl, and the best woman, that ever I knew, for I never knew any other human so set upon and uncomplaining. Before Taggart was shot, she was too true a woman to let herself care for any other man, and since his death she's been too true a woman to let herself fall in love with the man who killed her husband."

William looked at me with baffled eyes as if he hardly knew what I was talking about, and said, desperate, "All I asked was, Is Lane Laclede married?"

"William," piped up B. Hightower, "no, William, no, he is not."

This was all William contributed to our party till we had retired to the parlor. There, without waiting for us to take chairs, he asked Laidie to

give him a few minutes in another room as he had something very important to tell her.

B., with the cocksureness of old age regarding sentimental people, took for granted a little courting was to be had, and from Laidie's face, she thought the same. "Wait until we have a little singing," says B. "As to another room, the cook is eating in the dining-room and she allows no one in the kitchen—where could you sit? No, sir, we'll first have some singing; then I'll walk over to Horseshoe House with Stick, and leave you young people together."

"Correct," said I, looking reprovingly at William, whose ideas had become so enlarged from city life that he seemed to think the cottage might brood under its wings a hundred apartments.

Laidie sat down to the organ. From William's gray, set face I knew he'd go through with it or strangle on a high note, so I settled back in comfort and nodded approval of Van Buren's call for "Annie Laurie."

Poor William! How often he'd sung that song, supplying to Laidie's sweet voice a round ringing bass, just as, in times past, I'd built the groundwork for Gussie Meade's slender soprano, and just as B.—if we could credit his memory—

had, in his day, boomed out in the same duet with his sweetheart. High in air soared Laidie's voice, while William with his made a ladder to prop against her high position—"Gave me her promise true . . ."

Gussie Meade had given me her promise with kisses and with tears, for the keeping of which it had seemed not too much to lie down and die. But she'd married a man who was not a blacksmith and for a time it had seemed that life couldn't go on, yet things had turned out somehow, and so it would be with William. And I began to take comfort. After all, a successful life depends no more upon mutual love than on a similar taste in vegetables and meats; and William, while losing the finest girl in the country, might find another who would suit him better. But how he could hope it was beyond me, as I admired her blooming cheeks and listened to her tones, they being as smooth as satin, never having been trained to shake notes like clothes on the lines in a high wind. Also, as I sat there, a sadness came over me, as comes sometimes when you gaze upon a very lovely girl, and this thought was blown out of my thought-tree: that after all of us had been laid in our graves that song

would lift itself up as free and sweet and young as if it had not come down out of the past with the hearts of dead men for stepping-stones.

They were on the last verse and I had already made up my mind that at the last measure I'd carry off the old gentleman, thus snipping short my reflections which, however long-drawn out, could avail nothing. And suddenly the door opened and through that door—it leading directly in from the porch—two people stepped pointblank into our lives.

We looked up, startled, thinking there must be a mistake. For even if, as at hazard I set them down, they were the new owners and tenants of the College, therefore a part of the general conspiracy to turn the town upside down, surely they would not go about from house to house, besieging the old settlers without knocking for admittance.

Straight toward us they came, closing the door behind them, and I rose—as B. tried to do—not wishing to be drowned in the overflow. Laidie turned round on the stool, as William looked very close, thinking to place the intruders among his city friends, for they had not our air.

The strange woman cried out, delighted, "Ade-

laide!" And she threw her arms about the amazed girl and kissed her on both cheeks. "Adelaide, how stout you have grown!"

Right then I knew who she was, for only one person in the world had ever called her "Adelaide," though that was Laidie's name in the Bible, but such a name as could never hold together in Mizzouryville but must needs break apart from very weight.

The newcomer swiftly wheeled about, light of foot and wonderfully tight-laced, and dainty-hued as to underskirts and the like, and she made a dive at Van Buren.

"Don't you do that!" cries B., feeble and evasive.

"I will, too, you old goose!" And she embraced him, though somewhat gingerly. "Don't you know your own daughter? And mercy, what a horrible shirt you are wearing, this Christmas day!"

"It's Sylvia!" he gasped. "Stick, it is Sylvia —come again!"

She floated from him like a zephir and seized my hand—"Welcome, welcome, friend Stick! Can that wonderfully handsome young man with your hair and eyes be——"

"Yes, 'em," says William, all his St. Louis knocked out of him.

"Now, one and all," cries the lady, very gay, "let me present Mr. Selwyn."

"Your husband?" I queried, after a deep breath.

"Yes," she smiled at me one of those angelic smiles on a tapestry, "in a sense."

It occurred to me that if Laidie's grandfather —and Sylvia's father—was ever going to have that second stroke, now was his time; but he just sat there, wide-eyed and dumb-driven.

Mr. Selwyn, a splendid looking man, dark and tall and serious, shook hands all around while none of us even pretended to rise to the situation. Our hands were given limp and cold and as such he took them each in turn, with the same genial smile, his words soothing, as cautious lest he scare us to cover; and wild of mien I make no doubt we were.

XXII

If You Don't Believe in a Fourth Dimension, Try to Measure Womankind by Length, Breadth and Thickness

I HAVE before said nothing about Laidie's mother, nor should I ever have referred to her had she stayed away, for when a woman runs off from her husband, leaving him to die of a broken heart, and her infant to be tended by those who will, it is not for me to bring her back by so much as a twist of memory. For Sylvia to come back after nineteen years, bearing herself as gay as a May morning, was more than I could swallow without showing that it tasted bad. Therefore, announcing that I had been on the eve of taking my departure, I took it, close followed by William, with Van Buren sending wistful glances after us as wishing himself of our party.

On the way home there was no talk of a fateful interview to be held by William and Laidie in any sequestered room. Rather, he plied me with questions, for until now Laidie's mother had been a subject forbidden in my house. I would rather not have talked of her even now, but as she had thrust herself upon our page of life in large letters, it behooved me to serve as a fine-print note, serving out names and dates. And I took up as little space as might be, but every word was pregnant.

To go back: Van Buren Hightower, as everybody knew, had been carried off by an actress and married against his wishes and his plighted troth, he then being in his suppleness, and, to judge by the daguerreotype in the bureau drawer, a fine looker, in those days, and a fastidious dresser. This actress had lived long enough to tire of the fruits of her victory and was looking about, in my opinion, for other fruitbearing trees (having, in a word, spent about all B. possessed), when a low-neck dress and slippers in a draught brought on pneumonia which carried her off. One child was left, Sylvia, the only person of the name, either male or female, ever seen in our county, to the knowledge of Old Settlers' Bench.

Sylvia, growing up, was as unlike our village girls as a redbird hopping in a poultry-yard. She could sing, not so well as she believed, but better than her schoolmates; and knowing that her mother had been an actress (though not of the high class that get into the magazines with their teeth) she took life at a gallop, and while very young vaulted the fence of matrimony with no clear notion of what was to be found on the other side. She lived with her husband, my intimate chum, just long enough to name the bady "Adelaide"—and was off.

William asked, sharp and cold, "With another man?"

"To say 'Yes,' son, might give a wrong impression."

"Then I hope to the Lord you can say 'No'!"

I told him it was neither yea nor nay with such complicated characters as Sylvia. She was no more to be explained than the purple bloom of a morning-glory after you've planted nothing but pink. Everything about her husband had strained at her nerves. David was quick to judge cattle and slow to estimate men. He was fond of a joke if it wasn't too new, and he stood ready to argue any opinion you might advance, and

he didn't want to hear any news from you unless he'd heard it first and knew more about it than you did. He liked to live plain and save his money and stand on Bank Corner of Saturday afternoons in a blue shirt and yellow suspenders, talking about the mistakes of the President.

"She just went off, son. There never was any divorce. A young man from the city used to come down here to train her voice and later she began taking trips after musical culture, now to Kansas City, and even as far east as Chicago. But I never thought that young man meant anything to her. That is, no more than his just being a man. She was always partial to that order. Sometimes it has come to me that Sylvia is a character strayed out of the books in the smokehouse."

"And in the smokehouse she should have stayed!" William declared. "However, as her husband is dead, of course she's free to marry whom she pleases. But what could she have meant by saying that old Pomposity is her husband 'in a sense'?"

"No telling," and I shook my head. "But believe me Sylvia never, even from a child, dropped words that didn't have seeds in 'em."

On reaching home, we built up the fire and what from mental activity, and from much pacing up and down the room, we found that our Christmas dinner would not serve till morning, so cried out that we must either assemble something cold, or devise some hot dishes. Twilight had caught us, and I was for lighting the lamp, but——

"No," says William, "let's sit by the fire until six o'clock and then I'll cook supper like old times—for to tell the truth, I hardly tasted a bite of what I put in my mouth at Laidie's, and I'm as hungry as a bear." And he laughed out, boyish and hearty, at the mere thought of what was before us. Yes, and I laughed, too.

And just then, as might have been expected, there came a click of the front gate latch.

"It's Sylvia," I cried, hasty. "There was just one click when the latch pushed open. Sylvia never did shut a gate in her life. Quick—light the lamp!"

"Surely," says William, spell-bound, "she wouldn't come *here!*"

"Light that lamp, son—Sylvia is no woman to be meeting in the dark."

He seemed desperate as not knowing which

way to flee. "Father, she wouldn't come here, not on top of that jolt she's just given us."

"While you're arguing about it," I said low and penetrating, "I'll go let her in the door."

That put his match to the wick. For at times there's a power in my voice that lifts a man's arm to the set task.

XXIII

We Judge a Man by His Kin, but Ask the World to Judge Our Kin by Ourselves

THERE was more bulk than I expected at the swinging open of the door, for it was not Sylvia, but Sylvia's daughter. I fell back as if pushed against the wall as she came in with slow, uncertain step—her features were drawn as if to hold back the cry from a cruel hurt; I'd never have supposed cheeks so round and rosy could look so pinched.

Seeing William with the lamp chimney still in his hand beside the newly lighted wick, she went straight toward him, her eyes never changing in their steady blackness.

"William," she said, slow and distinct, "I've come to ask my promise back."

Leaning against the wall, I looked from one to the other, feeling that it was not for me to take any part.

"What do you mean, Laidie?" His hand trembled so as he turned the wick that he put out the light.

She answered out of the darkness: "I mean that our engagement must be broken off." While he was relighting the lamp, I could hear her breath coming heavy, and when the chimney was in its place, she said, quick: "Everything is changed."

He turned from the table to look at her very straight, and he asked with a little emphasis on each word: "Laidie, have you changed with everything?"

"Oh"—her voice quivered, and she flung out her hand—"don't you see?—I'm a part of everything."

He drew a chair close, and spoke in a tone that I recognized as my very own in speaking to little children, "You are tired. Sit down and tell us about it."

She leaned on the back of the chair. "No, I must hurry home. I just wanted you to know that we can never marry. Of course I shall never marry anybody. You know, I have thought all this time that mother was dead. Grandfather let me believe that. And nobody in Mizzoury-

ville knew anything different. And—and—and —so—well, that's why I want my promise back."

"Laidie," he said, with a gentleness in his voice you would never dream could have mellowed it. I just stood there with my eyes down, a great ache in my heart.

Presently he added: "Time doesn't change the truth, we know; but it softens it."

"This truth"—she bowed her face in her hands with her elbows on the back of the chair—"it's the kind that nothing can soften but death. Oh, I should have been told, it was a mistake that I was not told! Grandfather did wrong—Stick, *you* did wrong not to tell me." She cried out, dry-eyed and passionate, "Will it seem any different to you or to me fifty years from to-day that my mother is not married to the man she lives with?"

The room was so still I could hear my heart beating. I could not feel sore at her blaming me though it was the first time in my life that she had ever turned upon me so. I wouldn't have blamed her then for anything she could have done or said. I waited—waited for something to happen, almost sure it would; but the small part of

my mind that wasn't sure made a terrible coward of me just then.

At last Laidie raised her head, and the wonder I had felt when she came through the door returned to me at sight of her dark, drawn face. "I will go, now," she said, very calm and quiet, and with that turned away. "Good-night—good-night, Stick."

But William laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Laidie, do you love me as much as ever?"

"But it isn't a question of that," she faltered.

He went on, grave and kind: "When I come home in June, we'll marry; and if it's possible, I'll make your life happy."

She cried out, her composure all gone, that it could never be.

"Answer me this," he said, taking both her hands and watching her face: "Do you love me?"

"You know," she answered, protesting, "that ever since I can remember——"

"That's enough. And now tell me before I go back to St. Louis—for I'm going sooner than I expected—in the morning, I think—tell me that our engagement stands. Tell me you will be my wife."

She searched his eyes to find if he really wanted it, and the drawn tension of her face relaxed. The crimson dyed her cheeks—as long as I've known her, I've never again seen the look she wore when first she came through the door out of the night.

She drew away from him and came to me. "But, oh, Stick, ought I to let him sacrifice himself? Tell me, tell me, am I doing right?" And then the tears came. Shaken by sobs she clung to me, repeating, "Ought I? Is it right?"

When she was calmer, she murmured, still clinging to my neck: "Do you remember that strange girl you wanted me to meet at your party? I wouldn't come because we knew nothing of her mother—but suppose she had known about mine! *She* would have been the one to refuse. It seems a punishment sent upon me—But what am I to do? Stick, you used to know how to comfort me in my troubles—oh, what am I to do?"

She held up her dear face, and her sweet lips formed themselves for a kiss. I bowed my head to rest my cheek against hers. But I did not kiss her.

Soon after that, she went away and there was a lightness in her step she had not brought into

the house. And there was a whispering in the leaves of my thought-tree to this purpose: that her heart was brightened not by William's love in itself, but because he had stood the shock of her disgrace.

When she was gone, William looked at me with deep seriousness as if facing a tragedy; and I make no doubt that at his age it always seems a tragedy to contemplate marriage without love. But he faced it like a man, saying, with a grim line of humor drawing down the corner of his mouth to make a twisted smile, "Father, I'm not a-wavering!"

I think I was as proud of him that night as ever was father proud of son, and I wanted him to know it, and, although contrary to my habit and my philosophy, I resolved for once to give him unstinted praise. So I grasped his hand, and I said, "Son, you'll do!"

XXIV

Sometimes You Mistake Something Else for Your Soul, Which Is One Danger About Being a Soul Mate

AS soon as William was back in St. Louis, I set about finding out exactly what Sylvia had meant by having a husband "in a sense." I needed no wise man to tell me that she could explain it better than any other, but when one has set himself forth as a marrying man, he cannot be too particular; and knowing that all Mizzouryville was looking askance at the newcomer, I deemed it best to be seen with her only when safeguarded by the presence of others. Selecting, therefore, a time when not only Laidie, but Van Buren would be housed in the same room, I sought her accordingly.

Though she'd been at the cottage but twenty-four hours, Sylvia had turned everything upside

down as she always contrived to do with people's lives. The lumber had been carried from the lumber-room to the woodhouse, and the lumber-room was now a "library," though without books. The front room was so changed that where had been my favorite nook was a four-legged conveyance loaded with heaps of sofa-pillows, reminding me of a spring wagon coming from the mill. I found a seat near the door, and not at first perceiving that it was the same chair I had once ridden down from stress of my weight on its puny legs, I sat thereon, my hat between my knees.

Poor Laidie, her face bent low over her sewing, scarcely raised her eyes from her needle. Her grandfather, cleaned and starched till all the original Van Buren seemed washed away, sat bolt upright with his eyes glued to the paper designs, as if he could see his second stroke in a handwriting on the wall.

Sylvia was here, there, everywhere, and as I followed her floating movements I marveled at her youthfulness, grace and fluffiness. She was almost as old as myself, but she made a great gap between our ages, treating me as if she had to feed me on ground-up corn. And though my

purpose held, to get to the bottom of the case, I was that timid and abashed before her long-practised arts, that, like Jim Bob, I had not a frisk left to my legs. Her man was nowhere about which, at any rate, was a comfort.

"How fine of you to visit us, Stick—I hope it didn't tire you to climb the hill," said she, as if I were a hundred. And she perched upon the organ-stool as if she were nine or ten, swinging her little feet clear of the floor, and clearer of her skirts, so that there was much you must needs see, and seeing could not but admire. "You used to visit us just so when I was a young thing—ages ago." She turned her head to cry out in warning, *"Pa!"* The old gentleman had essayed to beguile his tedium with a toothpick, but he thrust it back into his pocket, hasty. Sylvia gazed pensively out the window. She knew she had my full attention, therefore need not exert herself to hold it, for I suppose there was not in Mizzoury-ville County to be found a pair of stockings of such bewitching and lively hues.

"And as in those good old days," said I, giving a start as she jumped to the floor to dart toward a picture that had sagged out of plumb, "my time for visiting is brief. I wouldn't inquire into your

private affairs, Sylvia, were it not that my son and your daughter are to be married next June, therefore I consider my interest warranted, and you, like-enough, amenable, and all as between friends of past days—therefore," said I, growing vaguer the nearer I came to the point.

She climbed on a chair to straighten the picture, looking at me over her shoulder. "Ask whatever you please," she called gaily. "What you can't read in the papers, I'll tell you."

"Then you've been in the papers, Sylvia?"

"Yes, but under my stage-name. Why, it's me that keeps the papers from going broke!"

I was depressed, knowing that this was no such matter as "Stick Attum Sundayed in Hannibal," or "Captain Little Dave Overstreet had his weeds cut the first of the week." I asked, dubious, "With pictures?"

"A trunk full; I'll show you!" And she was for darting away.

"I can't wait, Sylvia. Now, as to this Mr. Selwyn——"

"Yes, it's natural that you should want to know about him. Well, in what capacity?"

I looked down, perplexed, but there was no inspiration in my hat.

She came back to the organ-stool. "As a business-man, Stick?"

"No," said I, groping, "as a lady's man."

At that, she began to sing a little song, standing before me and lifting her skirts first to one side then to the other with dancing steps at the end of each verse, which in each case was foreign.

"So," said I, dry, "you are not married, Sylvia?"

She showed her teeth at me, and they were well worth showing, had this been but a matter of teeth. And she cried out in pleased surprise, "Why, Stick! So you understood my little song. I didn't know you had learned French."

"I'm no great scholar," said I, "but when a lady is asked about her husband, she doesn't answer with a song. In my experience, married people dabble but little in music, closing the piano with the days of their maidenhood. If you will kindly make the affair a little more succinct, I'd be obliged."

"Of course I'm delighted to explain. In my opinion, Stick, matrimony which means legal restraints, and chains for the soul, chafes one's higher nature. I married when I was too young to understand this. Knowledge came to me."

"Yes 'em," said I, indecisive.

She sat down on the stool, crossed her knees with locked hands about them, and began to chant her sentences in a curious sing-song voice that was agreeable enough, only it seemed to me she should have been in the city hall at a public gathering: "I came into the light. Then I knew. Then I sensed the truth. And what I knew, I knew for all time. For truth is eternal."

"That's so," I said. "And some lies have gray hairs, too."

She went on chanting, looking mighty uplifted and of a drawing-power hard to overestimate. "So I knew that in marriage-bonds . . . the soul cannot expand . . . cannot be free. Far better to meet and love and part—than to be tied hand-and-foot . . . to an uncongenial partner."

"Soul mates?" I asked.

"My soul is mated . . . his soul is mated by mine . . . But I would not have thought—you'd know what I meant . . . What do you know of soul mates?"

"There are some of 'em in the smokehouse," said I, dreadfully depressed. "Do your souls aim to mate together for some time?"

At that she came out of her trance. "Why,

my dear Stick! what are you talking about? Of course Mr. Selwyn and I shall live together as long as we live. That is, if we remain congenial; which we expect to do. We're just as tightly bound as if by legal ties. I'm sorry Adelaide feels so distressed about us, for we are to all intents and practical purposes man and wife. We are just like any other comfortable couple in the village."

I laid upon her an appraising eye. "Sylvia, how long has this present mating lasted?"

"It is three years next spring since we pledged our souls."

Hearing my chair squeak and feeling it quiver all over, I rose, hasty, to carry away what I had gathered. "Sylvia," I put on my hat, "I hope you won't find life here unpleasant, but Mizzouryville is terribly conservative. An attempt to force granitoid walks on the citizens has led to great bitterness, and I'm afraid the innovation you describe will rouse considerably stronger opposition than the new walks."

She laughed. "Dear old Stick, I know exactly what you mean, though you are trying to relieve my feelings with your little jest. Don't worry. All Mizzouryville will be trailing after me and

my Mr. Selwyn. First the town will shy from our bait, then it'll creep closer to nibble, then—we'll cage it!"

Then she began singing a song in a tongue not native, but, if my suspicions are correct, French like the other. And still singing, she closed the door behind me, and went back to her task of making over her family.

XXV

Public Opinion May Be Won if You Go Courting It with a Full Purse

HAVING heard what our soul mate had to say for herself, my next care was to hear what the town had to say; and there being no better quarter for the retailing of wholesale opinion than Old Settlers' Bench I went to hear it, back in the rear of the Laclede Grocery whither cold weather had driven my men. I joined the bunch about the roaring fire and they, knowing my time always brief for whittling, tossed the news back and forth without fumbling for the ball.

Ordinarily they would have opened up with good-natured jibes about my wife-seeking, such as a man, though he say, "Tut! tut!" is well enough pleased to hear. However, on the present occasion I escaped because Van Buren was kept close at home these days by Sylvia, and naturally we

took advantage of the absence of any one to discuss his affairs to a frazzle.

"Not even a justice of the peace did they have," says Captain Little Dave, stamping his wooden leg. "I'm old. And I'm so accustomed to the human frame from living in one over ninety-two years that I'd just as lieve discuss bowels as eyebrows and feel just as elevated, which will show you that I'm beyond false modesty. Sometimes I sit and wonder if there's any subject that could make me feel like blushing, and I bring up one after the other and study 'em. But I stay cold. All appertaining to flesh cuts no figure, for everything is so soon to crumble to dust. But what I've heard about B.'s daughter is beyond me. Gentlemen, I'm ashamed—gentlemen, I'm ashamed!"

"This is how I place it," says Jim Bob, speaking as if fighting mad. "If it had been *me,* taking up with a pardner without a minister or nothing, you wouldn't of let me come back here to squat. Town wouldn't of held me till morning. That's because I'm dog-poor and never had no luck and less energy."

"Cork your bottle!" Captain Little Dave reprimanded him. "You don't know that we'll let this

Selwyn stay here—he and B.'s daughter—I'm ashamed!"

"No, I won't cork up," cries Jim Bob, lifted to a spirit beyond himself by the injustice of the thing. "You just let me—Jim Bob Peterson—bring an affinity to Mizzouryville and put up at a hotel in fine linen. You'd set the dogs on me." And he bristled with fight. "I'd like to try it once to show you fellows that you'll let the Four Hundred do what you wouldn't take from me. It's because Sylvia was a Hightower, and them and the Overstreets always did think God made 'em out of irrigated soil. If I was to slip out and bring back a strange woman to wave in your faces and tell you it was all right, she was a New Woman, *I'd* be rode on a rail. It's because I ain't got no fine clothes nor gold rings, but am just an average American. That's what I call myself—an average American, too languid for actual work—languid was my birthmark . . . Is this what you call equality before the law that we bled and died for back yonder in '76?"

"Go get your woman," Curd Tooterflail cried, stung to desperation, and standing his red hair up all over his head; "I dare you to!"

"Gentlemen," said one of us, I'll not say which

one, "sometimes the wind blows wisdom into the mouth of a fool, and for once Jim Bob has said something. Society will go to pieces if we don't keep the marriage-bonds tight-knotted. The way Sylvia and Selwyn are living together is an insult to every right-minded man and woman in this community."

All of us looked serious, for such plain words would never have been given out, if the public pulse hadn't been found to beat to their tune; if Mizzouryville resolved to rid itself of the Selwyns, the thing was as good as done, and the thought of Laidie turned me cold. Just then in came Sheriff Cadwitch Beam, not as officer but as gossiping man, though in either character, of no great weight.

"Boys, have you heard the news?" he asked, ravenous to tell it.

"Don't tell any more," I told him; "we're full."

"Go ahead, Cad," Jim Bob pleaded, "go ahead and slop us over."

"Men," he said, his voice reminding me of what I have read about compressed gas and vessels bursting, "the mystery's explained. It has come out." Then he went on hoisting his voice at each phrase till at the end it went up like a

sky-rocket in a shrill whistling gasp. "I can tell you who bought up Taggart Gleason's Rockpile, and Stick Attum's Springs cottage, and all the land thereabouts once owned by Big Dave, and the old College, and the whole creation—and who's going to build a big tourist's hotel, and run a railroad right through our gardens and front yards connecting us to civilization—and property going up, and thousands of newcomers pouring in, and everybody getting rich, with factories and down-trodden factory-girls and child labor and saloons——"

Then he gulped for breath, and I said:

"Blow off, Cad, and buck up!"

He struggled for breath and filled himself and went on: "That Richard Purly over at the bank was never anything but a lay figure, just like Jim Bob here, with the College deed in his name, and him never telling us a word. But the mystery's explained. The thing's out. Octavius Selwyn is the trust, combination, corporation, capitalist, promoter. . . . And Octavius Selwyn has organized a company and named it, "Bigger Mizzouryville Company"; Richard Purly is the secretary and treasurer—of course Octavius Selwyn is the president. They're going to open up a fine office over

the Tidlin butchershop—the fixtures are already ordered from the city. A meeting is to be held at the courthouse to-night for the selling of shares and the blocking off of town lots around the Mineral Springs."

Then he drew from his pocket a handbill sticky black from the press, whence he had gleaned all his particulars, and which he hadn't dared show us first, else his tale would have lost its telling. Lane Laclede, who had turned pale at the mention of Taggart Gleason, stood as he had stood since then, clutching his right hand with his left to steady it, and from where he stood he read the lines aloud as Cadwitch held up the smeared paper.

I turned on my heel and left the store, bitter enough. As plainly as if the future were a book of my own writing, I foresaw that Selwyn would foment discord in our midst as long as the business men thought there was profit in his scheme. Contrary to our religion he might be, but we put money interests first, that seeming to have more to do with regulating the world than the rules and precepts of a better land. When we climb our spiritual heights on a Sunday holiday, we love to hear the Sermon on the Mount; but after trudg-

ing down to the levels of our daily lives, we want tools fitted to our hands for human use.

I was thinking these thoughts on my homeward way when Lane Laclede came hurrying after me. "Stick!" he called, breathless, "I want your advice. We—both of us want it." Then he broke off with a wild look, wringing his hand and holding it as if it would never keep still unless held. He caught his breath, and looked queer, and muttered, "But I can't stay away from the store. Are you going to be busy Friday night?"

His eyes made me feel all tingly, and I knew if ever there was a man in mortal anguish, he stood before me then. His fingers began crunching together so hard and fast that I was glad I could put him off. I told him I was going to leave town Thursday night to be gone a week, the shop left in capable hands, and Horseshoe House closed.

"Then I'll come Friday night week," he said, "somewhere around eight o'clock. Will you be at home waiting for me—promise you'll be all alone, for I . . . because we think—or at least—at least——" And he looked at me as ashen pale and as full of seeming terror, as if he found me some frightful ghost.

I told him I'd be at home on the evening named, that I would be waiting for him, and that I would be alone. And as soon as I'd given my word, he turned back up the hill staring straight before him like a man in an evil dream.

XXVI

It Doesn't Take a Wise One to Call a Man a Fool After He's Caught in His Folly

THURSDAY, the Bigger Mizzouryville Company was installed over Tidlin's butcher-shop ("Meat Market" on the sign) with handsome furniture and appetizing circulars and a black man in livery heretofore known amongst us as "Tuck." Shares in the New Railroad were offered, a dollar a share, in blocks of fifty, half to be paid down when the road was surveyed, the second half when the cars were in operation. It's easy to say now that men were fools to grab at such an offer, but they generally are when taken in the lust of sudden gain. The sight of surveying parties with chains and wagons and dogs starting first one way, then another, set some of the Improvers nearly crazy. Lots around the Mineral Springs were auctioned off like hot cakes, no

man knowing whether he was drawing a slat out of the old creek bed, or a wedge of Missouri sky propped on a Gleason Rockpile.

I did what I could to pull down the hopes my neighbors were rearing on shifting sands, getting frowns for my pains, so that at last my mere approach was enough to stampede the light-feeding cattle, they growing leaner the more they browsed on Octavius Selwyn.

Of course I ate at restaurants, these days, for set foot in Van Buren's cottage I would not till a few lines covering his daughter's relations to Selwyn were on court record; and this enforced absence from Laidie drove my longing for William's company to the bone.

Friday morning came. I was giving last instructions to my hired man and was about to leave the shop for the station, when at the open door Laidie stopped to smile at me. I felt like I hadn't seen her for six months, and that I might never see her again—the most satisfactory feeling I'd ever experienced, to be so short-lived; and in a breath I said—knowing no more what I was going to say than you do—I said how like home she looked with the market-basket on her arm, and how blue and sodden I'd grown from great loneli-

ness, and that I had thrown up my hands to fate and was leaving town to get me a companion.

"I've been casting my eyes abroad," I told her, "for now going on two years, but there's not a woman in Mizzouryville I'd give for a curl of your little finger. So I'm off to Higginsville where my old sweetheart lives, now ten years a widow, and no Mrs. Patty to step between. There she is with ten thousand dollars and three children and not a man in the house, and at the end of the week I can tell you more."

I'll never forget how Laidie put both hands on my arm, the empty basket slipping back to the crook of her elbow, and looked right up into my face with her big earnest eyes.

"I want you to be happy," she said, "and I want you to have whatever will make you happy." Then she kissed my hand and said, "That's for luck."

I wouldn't have cared how long she stood there, for her hand always was able to soothe the hurt in my heart. But the first thing I knew, she was going up the brown and green road with its splashes of yellow light, the sun at her back turning the lacings of her basket to links of gold, and pouring such wonders of pearly light on the side

of her face, that her hair was left in midnight. I stood there and watched until the last flutter of her skirts had passed on to gladden somebody else's world. I nearly missed my train, that time.

XXVII

No One Who Lives to Please Others Is Ever Pleased with Himself

NOT making myself known in Higginsville, I strolled to the quarter where people live who live on ten thousand dollars, and, by good fortune, saw at the window she who had been Gussie Meade before marrying a man not a blacksmith. So, having looked well, I went back to my hotel. Every day that week, and on some days more than once I saw her—and at church, also, during a long sitting. But she looked ever the same; so, in the end, I fared back to Mizzouryville, divining that after all is said, there are harder conditions than that of living single.

This news greeted me, in tones of high triumph: the first payment on the New Railroad would soon be made, fifty thousand dollars from Mizzouryville, and as much again from nearby

jumping-off places, most of it coming out of the pockets of men who could afford it least. The road had been surveyed, the right of way thumbed under options, and in early June there was to be given by the Selwyns a great Celebration Ball. Yes, and those who danced might feel that they were not only tripping it toward fortune, but flinging a foot at those "mossbacks" who, in truth, remained the repository of common sense in Mizzouryville County.

When first landed in town, you would not have supposed Sylvia and her soul mate could have gathered together sufficient people to hold a celebration, for no one was mealy-mouthed in expressing their indignation, much as all held Van Buren Hightower in respect. But sometimes I have sat down to consider with amazement what people can accustom themselves to. A man and woman unmarried, yet living together, give rise to headlines so contrary to decency and order, that one would spend his last nickel for the paper setting forth the details. But when you meet such on your streets just like anybody, carrying a tin bucket to fetch milk from the very old settler who sells to you (and will not deliver) it's different. When people are thrown with you in daily living,

they lose their gloss. Therefore I did not doubt that the Celebration Ball would bring the town to the promoter's feet.

Add to this that we are chary of giving dinners and entertainments, being practical folk, not disposed to spread our victuals as a banquet for birds, sharing rather with kinsmen and that none too often, though loud in eulogy of the hospitality of our forefathers. Times come when the church, with an idea of promoting friendliness amongst its members—of whom there are always some at deadly feud, though the cause, like-enough, forgotten—the church plans a series of "socials," the first always at the minister's, and there, an end. But the Selwyns had thrown Van Buren's cottage wide open and had even built on a room, and there were dances for the young, a sitting-around for the old, musicales for the idle, and spreads for the hearty.

In speaking largely I have gone ahead of my story and must now narrow the view to the night of Laclede's appointment. At home I was waiting for him when, to my surprise, Dahlia came knocking at the door. I knew only a pressing matter could have brought her there alone, but felt obliged to warn her that Lane was expected and

that the time was his. While making it clear, I was all the time thinking: "What a pity some good man did not win her for his wife! Seems unfair for that rounded form to hide a disappointed heart . . . those soft, pretty cheeks never to know the touch of love!"

"I knew about Lane," she said, and came on into the house, pale and nervous. It touched my heart to see one so young looking so worn, like a flower that has folded up because the light has died out of her sky.

I didn't know what I ought to do for it wasn't the same as if she were seated beside an elder brother. People passing could not have seen my brotherhood; but I didn't pull down the blind, just sat straight in my chair with my most fatherly expression. And I said as plain as if there were no dimple in her chin that she shouldn't have come.

Thereupon she began to talk fast, but without bearings, finding herself tossed from point to point and exceedingly hard to follow, giving me in general what I had long since guessed. The shot that had put an end to Taggart Gleason had not made a scratch on the debts he left, and the widow had shouldered all of them, sacrificing her home and her millinery shop and slaving from

morn to night—for the main reasons, as I believe, that her stepdaughter might not suspect her glad of being widowed. Of course Zenia believed her glad, and that made Dahlia work the harder. When Zenia married Big Dave Overstreet, she took her stepmother to live with her in the mansion where poor Mrs. Patty had laid down the scepter.

Being a man, and hearty, I do not pretend to understand the duel waged between the two women. Zenia, as passionately fond of her father as ever was woman of worthless man, kept an unwinking eye upon Dahlia lest she put forth leaves of healing. And Dahlia, determined that no one, least of all Zenia, should think her capable of enjoying her liberty, which would mean she was glad Lane had killed her husband, she, I say, hugged her mourning, and if there had been any blacker in the shops, she'd have bought it. And yet, all the while, Dahlia wondered if Zenia knew how she rejoiced at being rid of her chains, and Zenia was wondering if there was the least shadow of repentance or sorrow in her stepmother's heart, or if she and Lane had not plotted Gleason's murder.

"I can't bear it any longer," Dahlia cried out

in smothered tones. "If I had a spot of my own, however humble, I'd never set foot on Zenia's place again. Her deceitful politeness is killing me. And yet—I wouldn't dare leave her roof. If she couldn't watch me all the time, she'd think Lane and I are meeting. I've got to live by her side all my life—where she can watch me. She's jealous of my thoughts. She asks what I'm thinking about. We never mention *him*. But she talks about Lane—how he did it. And I have to listen, and seem not to care. She knows I care." She looked at me, dry-eyed.

I asked her why ruin her life because of what Zenia might suspect. She said that was something I could never understand, not being a woman. I talked a long while—said everything. She was just where I'd found her when I started.

"I must live where she can watch me," she repeated dully. "She must know, must know absolutely, that Lane and I do not meet. Stick, you know what Zenia thinks—well, it isn't all false. One night when *he* was drunk he was so terrible that I could have killed him, almost. And I told Lane about it. And he said to call for him if he were ever that way again. I didn't

call for him, but he *was* that way again and—and Lane did it."

I tried to drive these mad delusions from her mind.

She looked down at her clasped hands and her manner changed. "Stick," she said, very slow and faint, "I understand you are looking for some one to cheer your lonely life and serve you faithfully until death. And I've always come to you in my troubles, ever since I was a little girl and—well, and that's why I came to-night." She started up hurriedly and looked at me with unsteady eyes. "Don't you understand that I must have shelter, or die?"

I took her by the hand and led her to the door with these words: "My dear, I have it from Jim Bob that the people who bought the College are moving in and want me—I don't know how they know of me—to recommend a housekeeper. I'll recommend you; with plenty to do you'll quit torturing yourself with wondering what Zenia thinks. For good work is the best shelter from the unkind thoughts of the world. Good-night, my dear; always come to me in time of need."

So I sent her away looking as if she did not

rightly understand whether she'd got what she came for or not; and soon after Lane Laclede was at the door, gray of face, desperate hard of eye. And—

"Has Dahlia been here?" he asked.

"Just as you two planned," said I.

He stretched out his arm: "I'd give my body to make that woman happy." He added under his breath, "I've already given my soul. What did you say to her?" he jerked out, his face slowly turning a dull crimson, and his right hand clenching and quivering, then spreading wide its fingers as if to drop something upon the floor—doing this over and over, while the color deepened in his gaunt cheeks.

"The new owners of the College," said I, "want a housekeeper. I'm going to get Dahlia the place. It'll help take her mind off her troubles. That was all I could do for her, but I believe it'll work. If she stays much longer with Zenia, she'll lose her mind."

There was a slender iron bar on the table, and he took it up aimlessly, holding it in both hands, his head bowed. I'll never forget that look on his face. It made me feel that all the troubles I had ever known and all the disappointments I

had let rankle in my breast were but as grains of dust in a summer wind compared to the terrific forces that shake the earth in a hurricane. He said in a keen voice that was drawn with such ruthless force from his inner self that it shook him from head to foot—

"My God! how I love her!" Then he flung the bits of iron upon the table; for he had broken the bar in two.

"Even as she loves you, and would sacrifice herself for your sake."

He nodded. Perhaps he stayed an hour after that, but not another word did we exchange. In the end, he simply got up and went away without looking back; and when, next day, we met at Old Settlers' Bench, there was nothing except that movement of his right hand to show that he was not the same handsome, easy-going, indifferent Lane Laclede we had always known and loved.

XXVIII

To Measure a Man's Promises, Get the Tapeline of His Past Accomplishments

IT was nearly time for William to come home to marry Laidie before I met either of the Ludlow sisters, both single, the new owners and tenants of the College. Dahlia had been serving them as housekeeper for a couple of months when, one morning, I started to take the crosscut from the railroad to the old sawmill, this cut leading from the front stiles across the campus. I don't know that I was ever more indignant than when a woman's voice, pleasant enough as to quality, cried out from the locust grove in the yard—

"Don't you walk on our grass! This is private property, now. You go around, will you? That's what the public road is for, isn't it?"

I stood stock still with plenty to say, but none

of it suitable. I'd taken that short-cut since the closing of the College doors; and to have a brace of newcomers, two old maids from nobody knew where, talk in this wise to an old settler was enough to make the blood boil. But everything that came to my mind was too heavy to cast at birds, so I turned heel and marched off, dumb.

Over this I was stirred up all morning, my mind showing a wonderful activity that endured past dinner. I think it was about two o'clock as I stood in my shop cutting out a block of tin (though that was a tinner's business, hence pure accommodation, therefore small thanks received) when suddenly, I never knew why, unless of the morning's affront, a thought fell from my thought-tree. It wasn't a stray leaf, but full-grown fruit, ripe and heavy. I finished the tin-cutting and closed my shop—it was Saturday afternoon—and made for the public square, where the horses ringed around the courthouse told me the farmers were in town.

Finding some of the wealthiest at Bank Corner, I beguiled them by signs of secrecy to the courthouse wall that shuts in the yard where there was no danger of our being overheard unless by

tenants of the county jail. In all its nakedness I laid my plan under their eyes. Octavius Selwyn with his railroad scheme had not sprung out of the ground, I argued, from any dragon's tooth. Find if, at his last lighting-place, he had not foisted just such another proposition upon the people, leaving them with the bag to hold. Even if too late to save our citizens from the first payment, our probing into Selwyn's past might at least rid ourselves of his pestiferous cries for a new high school, waterworks, a Bigger Mizzouryville and what not.

I didn't know a farmer who lay down at night with five hundred acres under him who would have given a snap of his fingers for electric lights or grand opera over the hardware store (where our opera house is) every night in the week. The men I was talking to owned each about a thousand acres, and they took hold readily. We made up a purse to send our school superintendent in quest of Selwyn facts, he being a man of intelligence as became one in his business, and needy, as having followed it most of his life. His school was out, for we were in the middle of May, hence he was free to kill time till autumn, such being the privilege of this rather idle trade.

Two weeks he was gone, coming back stocked with information on the very train, as it chanced, that brought William home from St. Louis.

It was about ten on a bright moonlight night, when our "accommodation" stopped at the platform, the steers bellowing from the attached cattle-car, and the chickens squawking from the express car, and the passengers fighting to get off before a stream of eager travelers could squeeze themselves on. William, of course, first claimed my attention, but scarcely less important, in view of his mission, was our superintendent, whose name I cannot recall. After my son's embrace, the teacher grabbed my hand with: "I think we have all we need about Octavius Selwyn!"

Even at that confusing moment, I found my attention caught by a third man—tall, slender, a handkerchief tied to hide one eye and a slouch hat pulled low over the other as if to avoid recognition. At first I took him to be Si Cobwalter, who, some years before, had moved to Chillicothe, and as such I hailed him, not from friendliness, but to show that my memory worked. I would give no encouragement as seeming glad to have him back, for we want those who move away to stay away, it being unsettling to our

minds not to know what to expect, once they begin skipping from pillar to post.

But the man with the handkerchief was not Si Cobwalter, and when he gave me a look, odd but fleeting, there was a great rush of wind in my thought-tree, dislodging the idea that I'd seen that man in circumstances dark and sinister. He walked rapidly down the track, disappearing in the shadow of the tank. I speak of him thus as if he were a mystery; and I should be dealing without fairness if I spoke otherwise.

Hurriedly explaining to William the important business on foot—"I'll walk home with you," said I, "and in the meantime this gentleman" (calling the teacher by name) "may telephone to the farmers to assemble at our appointed place, where I'll join them without loss of time."

So William ordered his suitcases and trunks to be delivered the next morning—there's not a transfer man in Mizzouryville who can be induced to do business after sundown—and we set forth to follow the railroad track to town.

I had just brought up the subject of Laidie, finding him docile enough, when the College came in sight, after which he could give me nothing but yes and no, so I divined of what he was think-

ing. To clear his mind off its sandbar, I began telling how the new tenants had ordered me out of the yard and I put as much heat into the cooking of the tale as I could coax from kindlings that had already been charred; but when I had come to the end of it, he was still fast aground.

XXIX

There's More Eloquence in a Yellow Rose Than in a Congressional Record

AS we neared the steps leading from the railroad to the top of the wall whose coping is on a level with the bluegrass campus, we discovered a seated figure. Since no lights showed from the brick building, we thought it strange that any of the family should be there at half-past ten, with small chance of a cry for help being heard from the far end of the avenue. The stiles and root-veined path were blurred by overhanging branches, but the moon found its way to the young woman's face, making me think of a lily floating in pearly mist—and making William think of a spirit; the same spirit which, since a certain rainy night three years ago, had haunted his life.

I stopped deep-rooted with a gasp—"It's the

girl-out-of-the-common!" But William didn't stop. The next thing I knew, she was standing on the topmost ledge, while he, several steps below, was holding both her hands; and as he tried to tell her how rejoiced he felt over this miracle of a meeting, she, glad but not surprised—she'd been waiting for us—threw in how she'd ventured back to Mizzouryville for a last glimpse of him before his marriage. And I held it wrong of her to have come for this last view, since it was not as if she were gazing upon a painted form, he being very much alive. She tried to draw away, but he made nothing of my being there, insomuch that I scarcely knew which way to look.

"If I loosen my hold on you, you'll vanish," he said, so happy that my heart ached. "I must tell you all you've meant to me this long while —but if you escape, how can I call you back? I've no name for you except the one in my heart."

She looked over his shoulder at me, big-eyed, and asked, breathless, "Stick, may he call me by the name in his heart?" She was all aglow.

I tried to hang a pound weight to each of my words: "If he thinks Laidie wouldn't mind," said I. At that William stepped aside, and I

shook hands with her, speaking of the last time we'd met, the night of Taggart Gleason's death. But those two made little of my words, so full of sheer delight that they cared not whose eyes were blinded—if they felt anything for me, it was that condescending pity that young years feel for a wise head. They wouldn't have traded those few minutes of being together for as many years lived apart, for youth is a poor bargainer with old Father Time, and is like to be cheated out of a comfortable future by the lure of a little love.

"Let's sit here where we met to go to my party," she said, just as eager as he, "and talk and talk—everything we want to say must be said to-night. Do you remember when I first came to Mizzouryville as a teacher, I gave my name as 'Miss Cereus'? That's because the cereus is a night-blooming flower and must close up with the dawn. This time it's to be for good and all."

"But why?" he pleaded, sitting at her feet. "Little Night Bloomer, it shall not be for good and all!" And his voice rang with command.

I cleared my throat. William never would have been the high-graced ambitious fellow he was but for her, yet when his voice sounded soft,

not like a man's, and his eyes glowed as they did now, I looked for the reason in the moon, and saw ahead when the sun would be in the sky and Laidie at the altar.

"I have always wanted to know," William murmured, "if you were really angry with me in the chapel when Jim Bob broke up our party."

"You were so bashful and awkward," said she, "I never could understand how you dared."

"I was inspired. When you kissed father——"

"But dear old Stick—why, he's a regular patriarch!"

"It was all my soul had to live on till we met again," he told her.

She shook back her hair, looking down at him from under half-closed lids so that her eyes were almost hidden. There was in her expression something so remote and yet so near that for a moment or so he just forgot what they were talking about, and stared with beating heart—stared at the long dark lashes, the eye-gleams, like lights turned down low beside one's hearth, the pensive, softly-molded lips he had once dared kiss.

His voice sounded gruff because, I think, he feared to show his feeling: "Answer my question!"

Roused from deep musing, she looked anxious, as if wondering how she had offended him. "Did you ask something?" She touched his arm with fluttering fingers: "Tell me what you want me to say."

"That you are glad I kissed you."

Her face changed so quick from troubled doubt to radiant understanding that I think he had all his eyes could bear. She asked, like a playful child, "Shall I tell him, Stick?"

I was dumb.

Then to William, with wonderful gravity: "Before answering, I must give you fair warning that the Unintended always goes armed." Her cheeks burned. "The answer is, Yes," she said.

Behind them the campus with its dark masses of interlocked trees, their outer fringe painted white; before them an old brick church, and a sleeping cottage like a silver picture set against the blue sky; and within reach of my foot, the gleaming rails from the world that's real, where people are not out of the common, and where everything and everybody has a name.

A man came briskly along the railroad, his tall, slim figure clear-cut against the moon. A

handkerchief hid half his face, a drooping hat shaded his brow. Keen as knifeblades were his darting glances as he gave us "Good evening," in a deep bass voice.

The girl responded impulsively, "A beautiful night!"

He almost stopped. "Thank you," he said, finding it hard to go.

She asked William, "Did you feel queer? What a kindly stranger! And he has walked out of our lives. People are always walking out of our lives who might be good friends if they would stay." She sighed.

I told her I'd seen him get off the train, and the superintendent had told me he'd asked a thousand questions about our New Railroad scheme.

"But why did he thank me?" she wondered.

"Because you spoke to him," said William. "Just as I thank you because you look at me."

"William," said I, "shall we be going?"

She turned on me so quick that I caught my breath. "Stick," she said, in a broken voice, "I am just for this once—and Laidie is for a lifetime." She paused till the long drawn-out wail from the night freight died away like the cooing

of a dove, then whispered, "Give us only the time till the train has passed by."

I knew the freight would stop to switch before it came through town, but I said nothing. Somehow her tone had caught my throat in a grip.

Then William spoke, and his voice was broken just like hers: "If you'd been thinking of me the years I've been thinking of you—and if things were different while we were the same—I'd call you by the name in my heart; and there'd be no parting after the train has passed by."

She didn't stir till we heard the whistle for the bridge at the edge of town. "Uncle died a year ago," she murmured. "The Companion is the only rope I have by which I swing to conventionality—when she's gone, goodness knows what'll happen! I'm so frightened at having no one to sit in authority that I keep her—you remember how the frogs had a log for their king? That way. I'm afraid of myself—so full of wild schemes and daring—I want to fill my pockets and go out after adventure; but the more I want to roam, the tighter I cling to the Companion. I couldn't help breaking loose to-night because the paper said you were coming home, and I

knew you'd pass the old stile. But I mean to put strong chains on my demon of unrest and finish my adventures with this meeting. And why not? I've seen how you've turned out."

He took her hand: "And how do you like your job?"

"Just fine!"

He held her hand upon his breast and asked, deep and low, "Can you guess what I've kept in this pocket since we first met?"

After a little hesitation, she whispered, "A yellow rose?"

"The one you gave me in the dark. And a few blades of grass where you stood in our yard."

She started up swiftly as if to escape her grief; for she was crying. "The old rosebush is still by the well," she faltered, "full of roses . . . and I know the family wouldn't hear us . . . Would you like a fresh one?"

So they vanished up the path between the maples and I waited, heavy at heart, but still confident that after she had gone her ways, he would grow used to Laidie, telling myself that the little night-wanderer could be for him no fitting

mate, though a fair enough picture in a moonlight dream.

When they came back she was walking hurriedly; it may have been because the long groaning freight train had drawn up the grade and the yellow caboose was creeping past the stiles at a snail's pace as if for a moment fate were slowing down for her—or it may have been because in the darkness, beside the fragrant rosebush, he had called her by the name in his heart.

Evidently they had agreed upon no more farewells, for she caught my hand to press it, then darted down the stiles and swung herself aboard the caboose. He stood on the top of the wall gazing with all his might, and she held her face toward him in the moonlight that he might see clearly, and she would have given him a long look, only the tears were falling so fast she could not keep them brushed from her eyes.

XXX

Watch the Man Who Doesn't Want to Be Seen

I TOOK William from his dream at the College stiles to my business at the Old Log School House—about three miles out in the country, where the superintendent had agreed to assemble the farmers. We found half a dozen there; and after our emissary had related all he knew of Octavius Selwyn, we had him write it out for next day's circular distribution. And after we had thrown out that which was not essential to his tale—he being a hundred times more grieved over what we cut out than pleased over what we left in—it was still so early, I remember, that the shadows of ragweeds growing across the dusty road spangled the side of the schoolhouse as high as the row of windows.

Here is what we learned: Before coming to Mizzouryville, Selwyn had operated a railroad

scheme in Arkansas similar to the one offered us. On the road being surveyed, and the right of way obtained, stockholders had paid down half; whereupon our promoter, instead of going ahead, had slipped away with the cash in his bags. Now, this was the dawn of the day that called for half payments in Mizzouryville; and before a penny had been paid down, our facts were in the possession of every business man in the county, either in cold print or by heated telephone.

I closed my shop that day to work in the people's interests, drawing such pay as usually falls to the lot of a man working in that cause—many frowns and little thanks. In my part of the country, when you give your time and strength for the public, it turns them cold, they suspecting that you have some hidden way of "getting something out of it"; whereas if you make it plain that you're after office for your own pocketbook, sometimes they'll cheer you on.

Hard as we strove to bring the people to reason, news came to Old Settlers' Bench and to Bank Corner that payments were being made right along. For holders of certificates to have admitted possibility of fraud would have been to con-

fess themselves unwise in entering the scheme; and it's easier for a man to continue in the way of a fool to the end of his days than by facing about, admit that he has been one. Therefore they called us old fogies and abused us as being opposed to progression. To strengthen their hands, Selwyn gracefully admitted our superintendent's statements, claiming that he meant to return to Arkansas and complete that railroad as soon as he had ours under way, he to put a big corporation behind both, as finding it cheaper to build railroads in the bulk than piecemeal.

But there was a reason still stronger for prompt payment—the law, as expounded in loud mouthings by Lancaster Overstreet. In black and white stood the agreement to pay down before six o'clock of this day, and those certificates, the same as personal notes, would begin drawing interest at seven per cent., and would run on and on, railroad or no railroad, with no legal remedy to stop the flux.

So paid it all was, Selwyn cashing every check as it came in, so that by six o'clock he had over seventy-five thousand dollars in his steel safe over Tidlin's "Meat Market" (the butcher-shop).

That was the night of the Celebration Ball. It

would be idle for the most rabid advocates of a "Bigger Mizzouryville" to claim that our superintendent's circular was without effect. On the contrary, there was a quick feverish pulse in town all day which by night was beating above a hundred. People felt that their fates depended upon Octavius Selwyn, who had their money and, in exchange, had given them nothing. He must be kept in good humor; and an invitation to his ball was like a king's request to the characters in some of the books in the smokehouse.

Since Van Buren's cottage was too small for the festivities, the last Mrs. Big Dave Overstreet —I mean Zenia—proffered the use of her mansion. Time was when our best set wouldn't have put foot in Taggart Gleason's place, unless to buy a new bonnet, but now Zenia was the bellwether of the flock of fashion, with the Overstreet brand on her forehead and the Overstreet estate for her horn of plenty. And hers was a fitting scene for the celebration, since our great trouble would never have befallen us had she not sold the Springs property inherited from her husband. ("Poor papa would have wished it," she said, very pious. "It nearly broke his heart when mother refused to sign a duplicate deed for the

sale of the Rockpile. Papa loved this town, and everybody loved him who knew him. Papa was the father of the progressive movement," said she.)

"Of course," I told William, "I shall not go to this ball, but with you it's another story. The town may have forgotten that Sylvia is not a lawfully wedded wife, but Laidie never forgets, and if you stay away you'll hurt her cruelly. Now that the Unintended has ridden out of your life, it's for you to act as if she had never come into it."

"I want to stay at home with you," he pleaded, futile.

I was determined he should be at that ball with every eye set upon him as upon a man bespoken, marked out from his fellows. The Chinese lanterns in the yard might remind him of the girl-out-of-the-common, but Laidie would be hanging on his arm looking her best, with her mother's foolishness to draw them close together. I was pleased at the prospect, and glad, too, that Zenia's stepmother would be spared the ordeal, safe at her post as housekeeper for the new College folk —I could almost forgive them for ordering me off the grass when I thought of the pain they were sparing Dahlia.

After supper I went up town, my mind busy with the picture of William making himself fit for the ball—only, instead of him, I seemed to see myself, for I felt as young as he looked; and because there was such a contradiction between my years and my feeling, my heart was heavy. I have lived as heartily as another, sopping up the juices of content with a clean platter to show for it; but I hadn't had enough of youth, and that night I was feeling my hunger.

It was some relief—but very little—to sit on Old Settlers' Bench beside others so much older and smaller than myself. Of course Captain Little Dave wasn't there, he being too wise to bring out ninety-three years to sit in the falling dew. But there was Jim Bob Peterson, chewing his tobacco and missing the holes in the sidewalk-grating; and Van Buren who had been let off from the ball and was trying to ease himself in his stiff shirt; and Curd Tooterflail, who had made a name for himself when young by the keeping of a fighting cock, but done nothing of note since, yet was old enough to be my father (though if capable of producing a son so nimble, with no evidence to prove it); and, to complete the row, there was Sheriff Cadwitch Beam, of my

age, but infinitely removed by a tortoise-shelled brain. In the doorway stood Lane Laclede, and it struck me that I'd never seen him so thin since he got his height, and that, somehow, he looked about as old as the rest of us.

We were not full of talk because Doc Snaggs was driving the glass coach past on every trip to and from the ball; and such was its novelty—it having been brought overland all the way from St. Joe by our best set—that it gave us almost as much pleasure seeing it empty as filled. When its newness had begun to wear upon us, I descried a man wandering about like a lost ghost. It was Brother Wane, who, being a minister, could not be called to the ball and who, as one desirous of holding his place, was not expected to refer to dancing from the pulpit, he being by the nature of his calling and poverty debarred both from the delights of participation and denunciation.

Divining that in his zeal to win attendance to his Sunday school he would shake hands with us, beginning at one end of the Bench and so down the line without the loss of a man—up I started, as having remembered an errand. As I whisked around the corner, Jim Bob was writhing in his iron grip.

Beyond the corner, I found the street deserted except for one man who seemed to want to escape being seen, and as I sometimes have that desire myself, I was for slipping back to Brother Wane and to all that might befall me. But as the man —not seeing me—darted into the broad band of moonlight that ribboned the middle of the street, I found him to be the stranger I had first taken for Si Cobwalter of Chillicothe, he who later passed the College stile and thanked the Unintended for her pleasant word. He no longer wore the handkerchief over one eye, nor was his hat pulled down to hide his face, and as he leaped through the moonlight like a flame's shadow I recognized that tall, slim figure, that granite face.

He was the man whose name had terrified many a heart, whose hand had brought death to not a few—our world-famous highwayman, Giles Flitterfled.

XXXI

Feed Them the Same Politics and the Lion and the Lamb Will Lie Down Together

BEFORE I could have cried a warning, the highwayman leapt to the outside staircase that clings to the side of Tidlin's butcher-shop. Up he went like a squirrel while I, in a breath, dived back to Old Settlers' Bench. Though of great weight, my speed was rapid, and, thanks to Brother Wane, I hadn't been missed. "Boys," I heard him say, "I'd like to see all of you out tomorrow at Sunday school——" And seeing me standing apart, "Brother Attum," says he, "tell 'em it'll do 'em good; I'm sure you can move them."

"Yes, I think I could," said I, sitting down between Curd and Cad, my knife open in one hand, and my other hand reaching for a stick to whittle. "I believe I could move 'em rapid." Then

giving Cadwitch a poke in the side—"Mr. Sheriff," said I, "there's a man breaking into the Bigger Mizzouryville office this minute—you'd better get busy."

He stared at me as if I were the moon, and Jim Bob asked, feeble, "What on earth are you driving at?"

"There's nothing," said I, "between that robber and some seventy-five thousand dollars but the walls of a steel safe. His name is Giles Flitterfled." And I got up, still whittling.

The next second that Old Settlers' Bench was as bare as the back of my hand. First I had frozen them stiff, then melted them away. Jim Bob slopped right down under the Bench behind my legs, and I never did know what became of B., he not stopping to debate between the chance of a second stroke or of being run over by the safe-blower. When it came to a choice of evils, old Uncle Van Buren Hightower clung to something chronic. Only Cadwitch Beam stood his ground, but he was shrewd enough to select the ground at the head of the alley—a handy exit in case of fire.

Just then, hearing wheels approaching at a tremendous rate, Cadwitch drew his gun and clenched

his teeth. A buggy whizzed past us like mad, and nearly turned over as it rounded the corner toward the butcher-shop.

"It's Octavius Selwyn, driving alone!" Cadwitch gasped. "He couldn't have got a tip that his office was being robbed, now could he? Then why has he come away from his Celebration Ball?"

Jim Bob stuck his head out from under the bench and quavered, "His buggy's stopped right in front of Tidlin's. I know the sound of a wheel when it grinds on that iron spike in the gutter. He'll go up there and run across Flitterfled. They'll fight. I'll bet Flitterfled has got his gang guarding the square from every street. There'll be bullets flying. And dead men."

"Stick," Cadwitch asked, desperate, "what would you do?"

"I'd get my posse. You'll find a ballroom full of men at Zenia Overstreet's." I didn't say any more to him—what was the use? In those few seconds I had grasped several startling truths, and as one big truth is enough to fill a man, I felt light-headed. Why had Selwyn converted his checks into cash that day? Evidently all the time he had meant to drive for the money while the

town was at his wife's ball, and skip with the cash.

Of course a thousand lawyers couldn't have taken that money from his "Company," but a few determined citizens are ofttimes stronger than the law. Therefore, had he driven so furiously to the meat market, little suspecting that, up above, our celebrated highwayman was examining his safe. And how did it chance that Flitterfled was there on this night of all others? It was no chance. Having met on the train Mr. What's-his-name (our superintendent), he had engaged him in chat because from the home of his fathers. Giles had wormed from our teacher (sharp in books but dull-edged to common sense) all about the Bigger Mizzouryville Company and that had been enough to inform any intelligent man with the instincts of a wild bear that he'd find money in the tree.

I have been asked why I didn't raise the hue and cry on first seeing Flitterfled. Here is my reason for all men to take or leave, as it suits them: knowing our citizens had been robbed of their money with no hope of recovery, I preferred having it carried off by a bandit professed.

There we stood waiting, Cadwitch afraid to

call for help and I not wanting help to come, when suddenly an explosion of dynamite from the direction of the butcher-shop told its story in big print. It broke the glass in Laclede's Grocery, and brought Jim Bob with a scream out from under the Bench, which was the last I saw of him that night. Cadwitch Beam sprinted down the alley after his posse. Shots rang from the next street and there was a cry of pain. Around the corner, mad with fright, came Selwyn's horse, and I stood ready for him, my two-hundred-odd pounds towering like a high rock in his current. Be my metaphor mixed, be it assorted, my purpose was single—and under my grip that snorting roan was no more than a dog in its collar.

Before I could spring into the buggy, the shooting stopped. I drove around the corner, raking the four points with one gattling-gun glance, but nothing was to be seen alive save Curd's head thrust over the eaves of the Mizzouryville Bank roof, his arm signalling me to look toward the outside stairs of the meat market. Thither I drove, the horse prancing with fright.

On the pavement at the foot of the steps lay a man's body out of the moonlight, but I could make out the blood that trickled across the planks

to the gutter. The face was turned away, but there was no mistaking Octavius Selwyn. Beside him lay a carpetbag. It was empty.

I called to Curd Tooterflail, peeping cautiously from his elevation: "Come down, you old fool, and stop his bleeding while I get the doctor." And not waiting to make sure whether Selwyn were dead or alive, or if Curd would obey, I put whip to the roan.

Down Osage Street I plunged, I praying that I might find the doctor sober than whom, if sober, no man is better in an emergency, I care not how many diplomas holding, nor how many trained nurses held in leash. I had rounded into Main Street where it cuts Locust to slide down past the power house, when a horseman came plunging up the steep in the full glare of the moon, almost running into me. He had a six-shooter in one hand and a heavy bag in the other—and his bridle-reins were between his teeth.

As he swept by like the wind, I yelled, "Have you got it, Giles?"

He, looking back over his shoulder, and seeing an old play-fellow, began to smile. But before his smile could reach from one corner of his mouth to the other (that being always his fash-

ion of mirth) he was out of sight. It had been fifteen years since we'd met; but such is my personality, and such was his memory for a man of build, he'd made no mistake. He knew my pistol would never be turned against him, so bitterly had he and his family been wronged during the War for the sake of the very political convictions that fit me like a glove.

XXXII

It Doubles Daring to Believe What You Hope

I GOT Dr. McIntyre to Selwyn's motionless form on the sidewalk where, in the meantime, Curd and others had been doing what they could. After a thorough investigation, Dr. McIntyre straightened himself up with: "I give him ten minutes to breathe his last," very impressive.

Then I knew Selwyn had a chance for his life, for if he hadn't he'd have been pronounced dead already, our physician always making out the case worse than it is to reap by-and-by a richer triumph.

"I'm glad," said I, from a full heart, "that Selwyn has this bullet in his wing to stop his flight."

"You are *glad?*" cried Doc Snaggs, very hot, stopping the glass coach in the street to glare at me—he was the twin who had studied medi-

cine, getting nothing out of it but the title. He was angry because a heavy investor in the New Railroad, and he saw no hopes of his paradise of sudden wealth without the guardian angel. Men were carefully carrying away Selwyn's motionless form, followed by the doctor as master of ceremonies, grand and pleased.

"You are *glad!*" echoed Buck Snaggs, the other twin, more gifted than Doc, able to put into speech what stopped dead cold on the hackman's tongue. "You are glad Selwyn is killed, and yet your son is about to marry the daughter of Selwyn's wife!"

"It's on Laidie's account that I'm glad," I explained, patient. "Nothing but shed blood could ever have convinced the town that Selwyn wasn't in Giles Flitterfled's scheme to carry off the money." And turning on my heel I left them to digest my words, with Selwyn's empty carpetbag serving as sauce to my meaning.

In the meantime, the face of events had changed. Before blowing up the safe, Giles must have tied his horse down by the mill, but after securing his booty, evidently had changed his mind about escaping toward the north. Retracing his steps had lost him time and when he came out

upon the south road leading toward the Mineral Springs, many of the Celebration Ball guests had already secured weapons.

When his horse suddenly burst into the moonlighted road, somebody fired—no one ever knew for certain who it was, though many claimed the shot. Down came the big black horse, a bullet in his foreleg. To the ground fell Giles—but upon his feet. All was like the quick flashing of pictures coming and going before the mind could clearly grasp them—Over the barbed wire fence—a crashing through undergrowth of the deep woods, the heavy bag in one hand, a blazing revolver in the other—and the scared, white faces of the men as they dodged the bullets—and the screaming of the wounded horse; and after that, dodging black forms, humped-over close to the earth, pursuing in dress suits—the crashing of firearms, the scattering of leaves on the breezeless air—and an uneasy silence.

Somewhere in the woods that stretched unbroken for a mile or two beyond the Mineral Springs, he was hiding—a forest in places several miles wide, with Midway Creek winding throughout its length, and a road not often used crossing it at one point over a high red bridge

and, at another place, meeting it at a shallow ford.

Our townsfolk were in a frenzy. Well they knew that Giles Flitterfled had their New Railroad in his bag, and they fancied—for what they hoped they believed—that could the money be restored to Selwyn (who was no more dead than you or I), the New Railroad would eventually get itself transferred from blue prints to green earth.

Our plan of procedure was as follows: By telegraph, telephone and messengers we spread the news to all nearby towns and school- and meeting-houses, and, in due course, had a line of watchmen strung around the forest, each village supplying its volunteer guards. Fortunately the woods extended into the next county, therefore we had the assistance of a sheriff who knew black from white. While he, capable and willing, guarded the southern angle, and while Cadwitch Beam did as we told him (I classed myself with my fellows in this search, rising or falling with the fortunes of Mizzouryville), it seemed certain we must soon starve Flitterfled into the open.

Nor were we content with a still-hunt. Al-

ways there was a party of resolute men exploring the interior, while the outer cordon held itself taut. These exploring parties relieved each other so that those desirous of coming to close grips with the fugitive might always be fresh, and each have his chance at glory.

But because we had never learned whether or not Giles Flitterfled was working single-handed, we feared to venture in deep places except in goodly numbers, for if with him were three or four of his hardy campaigners, a dozen of our desk-and-counter-men would be at great disadvantage.

The night after the safe-blowing, the passenger train brought many strangers to town, and by noon there were so many automobiles in the streets that we walked through each other's yards. Reporters came from St. Louis, Kansas City, St. Joe, Hannibal, Springfield, Joplin, even from cities outside the state.

What days those were! Life became a camping-out, a perpetual suspense and excitement. Some took lunches from home, others built fires at the margin of the forest and there cooked what they could find, and always there were people sleeping on the ground by day and by night.

Long articles appeared in city dailies with pictures, some of them plain enough to be made out, and the legend of the "Boy Desperado" was cooked over till the taste was lost—I mean the rumor that a young boy had been seen carrying food into the forest to keep alive the highwayman. Once a watchman, waking from deep slumber, found in his pocket a missive signed "Giles F." couched in language such as may not be put into a book, though it was never yet poured into a man's ear that it did not arouse the most lively and pleasing emotions. But I cannot reproduce that letter here—let not my pen halt with any such purpose.

Several times, exploring parties found where the fugitive had eaten, and, to judge from odds and ends of mince and pumpkin pies, had fared sumptuously. Had the "Boy Desperado" actually a place in reality? I could never find any one who had seen him—all was hearsay. But somebody, whether boy or man, must be slipping through the lines, causing us cruel loss of time and sleep, otherwise the highwayman would be making a dash for freedom, since he was no man to live off redhaws, pawpaws, blackhaws and the like.

It was a Saturday night when my turn came to venture with a search-party into the heart of the forest—for I had held back, not wishing to be the man to lay hands upon Giles Flitterfled. Yet I was resolute to do my duty by my town if he crossed my path, and William felt as I did. We were sure he had not escaped, and it seemed certain that at the end of the week he must be a good deal weakened by the strain and his privations.

"Let's hope for the best," I whispered to William, as we joined the party, "and that is, that he fall not into our hands."

XXXIII

Better Unite Under a Poor Leader Than Follow a Dozen Wise Counsels

AS we slipped into the woods, William and I formed the compact to keep close together in case of a charge from the enemy—his number unknown. We were for taking Giles Flitterfled alive and, if possible, unharmed, and with us in this intention stood Lane Laclede and Curd Tooterflail and our sheriff. On the other hand, Richard Purly was blood-thirsty because his salary as secretary of the Bigger Mizzouryville Company (very handsome—in prospect) had been bagged; and almost as fierce was Lancaster Overstreet, the company's lawyer. Pem Hoochins spoke fair on both sides, telling me Giles should be spared for his political integrity, and whispering to Purly that he should be shot down on sight; but from what he said, you could never

rightly know where Pem stood, though in action I never yet failed to find him on the wrong side.

"I'm for shooting him like a dog," Buck Snaggs muttered as we crawled under the bushes off the main road. And his twin who was but his echo, his view of life having been constricted by his narrow scene of daily action—the driver's seat on the village hack—this twin, Doc Snaggs, growled, "Shoot him like a dog!"

Whereupon, "Halt!" whispers Cadwitch Beam. And after we had drawn about him in a circle, there was a low-voiced but violent argument as to how we should use Giles Flitterfled when captured. We were twelve men, all told, two of them non-committal—Jim Bob by nature, and Dr. McIntyre by profession. Reason prevailed, for if we did not obey our sheriff, all would be at cross purposes, however poor our leader. And a poorer than Cad Beam, where could one be found?

Having pledged ourselves to take Flitterfled unscratched if possible, we plunged deeper into the wilderness, making toward the spot where had last been found remnants of the outlaw's feast. All about the lonely spot we prowled and sniffed with no better idea of which way to turn than

the high-priced bloodhounds when brought down on the Sunday night accommodation to dabble their paws in Midway Creek, then to be taken back to Jefferson City, well-fed and sleek as fireside cats.

Stretching out, Indian file, we worked southward, examining every bush and tree by the way, quick-motioned because the moon would soon be up to reveal us to any watchful eye. When we came to the big red bridge we trod softly, and several were already across when Jim Bob stopped at the railing to peer fixedly at heavy shadows along the opposite bank. At first I gave no heed, believing that if aught was to be seen he would be the last to lay eyes upon it. But as I came up, he plucked my sleeve—

"Look!" he whispered; "what's that at the edge of the water?"

So dense was the wood on either side of the bridge, we could hardly see each other, much less distinguish objects down below. Midway Creek is never clear, and for weeks it had been muddied and thickened from rains washing our rich farmlands; and yet I fancied something blacker than the overhanging grasses and pawpaw bushes was pointed out by the old man's shaking finger.

"What do you take it to be?" he asked under his breath.

"A skiff," I answered—"*the* skiff." For there is only one boat on Midway Creek, and it's never used save in times of picnics, the balance of the year finding it tied up to whatever tree came handiest to the last disembarking couple.

By this time, three or four had gathered at the railing; but those in front, hearing nothing, went on their way, supposing us at their heels.

"It's moving," William whispered. "You fellows stand back, or you'll be seen."

"It's nothing but a shadow," Lanky Overstreet declared. "Just a shadow, and we're losing time —stand back, Uncle Jim Bob, or you'll fall over."

"I'll not fall over nothing," Jim Bob hissed, so puffed up at having seen something first, that he was like to burst. "Shadow—your grandfather! I tell you it's a-moving. It's creeping right under the bridge. What did I tell you——"

Then he gave a curdling shriek. He has always declared that one of us gave him a push while he leaned over the railing; but if so, somebody lied. In my opinion, he was so eager to discover his America while we were still crying

that there was no hope of land, that he leaned too much of his physical man on the prop of his ambition. At any rate, over he went, heels up,—a drop of more than twenty feet into a stream so shallow that if the bottom didn't fall out of the creek his head certainly cushioned itself in oozy mud.

Now was the time for quick action—across the bridge we dashed, no one for a moment deeming that Jim Bob could get out of his predicament unaided. Those who had gone serenely on ahead were petrified by the shriek, the splash, and the thud of our boots across the rattling planks. Back they came, their tongues bristling with questions, and no man with time to give answers. And when they saw us plunging down the bank which at that place is as steep as a barn roof, they bared their gums in a sort of panic of curiosity.

All through that part of the county I had coon-hunted as a youth, an ax over my shoulder, dogs running before, and in my pocket a big red onion with plenty of salt. Therefore, I slid over the upper ridge of the bank as a sailor who knows his chart, and setting my heels rigid, let myself drive hard. But not as a youth went I down that long slope in the pitchy darkness, for though

my mind was alert to every need, my muscles refused to flex at will, and my two-hundred-odd pounds gave me a momentum confusing to behold.

Skidding along at a tremendous rate, I, by great good fortune, drove into Curd Tooterflail who, lighter of foot, had almost reached the water's edge, and—*Splash!* into the creek I sent him, the bluffs echoing back his frantic cries, unseemly, yet cogent enough. I, like a great ship driven upon a sandbar, stopped short, quivering from beam to stern—while from above came fresh demands for an explanation of what was going forward.

Out of the blackness between the banks came a ringing, sonorous voice—"Throw 'em in one at a time, boys, one at a time!"

Straining my eyes, I made out the skiff in midstream, and the pale blur of a man's face.

"Giles Flitterfled!" shouted Cadwitch Beam. "I know you by your voice, and as sheriff of this county I call on you to come ashore and surrender."

To which I added, reasoning, "There are twelve of us, Giles; you can't escape; and we don't want to do you any harm."

Curd cried out, choking, "Give me a hand, somebody. First thing you know, I'll be drowning here."

Richard Purly blustered, "You can't get away, Flitterfled. We've got you at last!"

"Boys," came the deep bass voice, "you think so. But remember that chap who fell off the bridge; well, I'm holding him right across my breast, and if you shoot you'll murder your friend. Stick Attum, if I were you, I'd pull that wet fly out of the water that's buzzing over there at the edge."

"Yes, pull me out," chattered Curd. I did it; I owed him that much.

"Now, boys," said Giles, calm and deliberate, "I'll not hide from you that this pard is in a bad way. Nothing'll save him but rolling on the ground, and that mighty quick. I'll row him to shore if you fellows agree to let me go free. And if you hesitate he's going to strangle to death."

The others were struck dumb. I asked him if he'd set his liberty against a human life.

"If this is murder," he said, "you boys are the murderers. There's still time to save his life, and I guess it's something that I'm willing to trust to your word of honor."

"We won't harm a hair of your head," called Buck Snaggs, desperate. "Bring him ashore. We'll give you a good start, then catch you again."

Doc Snaggs echoed, "Give you a good start—catch you again!"

"Let the sheriff swear for his men," Giles stipulated.

It was well he landed when he did, for Jim Bob was almost gone. I would not have believed a man could swallow so much water, though if any man, Jim Bob, certainly. We worked with him long and desperate, taking turn about, and Giles made one of us, toiling like a trooper. At last we were rewarded by seeing him take up reluctantly the burden of life he'd never known how to adjust to his shoulders.

As soon as Jim Bob could be propped against a tree, I whispered Giles to go, for it seemed to me he had a trust too great in his fellow man. Purly was glaring at him in a cold fury; suddenly he snarled—"Where have you hid that money?"

Flitterfled just laughed, and said, his whiskers quivering with enjoyment, "Jim Bob always did strike a rock or something when he went diving. That bridge was too high for him."

"Yes," sounded Jim Bob's feeble voice, "I was never no figure at a man's work. I'm too slow."

"Take him back home, boys," Giles urged, "or he won't last—seventy years old, isn't he?"

"Only sixty-five," Jim Bob protested, weak and watery, "but mighty harrowing years."

Then Pem Hoochin and Dr. McIntyre helped him across the bridge and down the road to town, while Curd followed in his dripping clothes. The moon was rising as we stood watching them defile around the curved bluff, the first beams painting their heads and shoulders with a broad white brush. When they were gone, we stood very still for a few moments, while something told me that Giles had waited too long, and that trouble was ahead.

XXXIV

When a Man Is Wedded to Sorrow, Good Luck Seems a Temptation to Unfaithfulness

STICK"—Giles stepped backward, hands in pockets, as if to make a dash for it—"do you remember about Curd and the red rooster?"

William called out, "You ought to hear father tell that story!"

Giles looked at me hard, moving backward very slowly, though I motioned him to hurry. "Do you mean to tell me, Stick Attum, that you're the father of this fine strapping fellow?" Then his voice grew wistful: "Mine has been the devil's own life—but there's no going back, boys, there's no going back."

He was about twenty feet away, near the top of the bank when Purly, who had edged away from us, suddenly covered him with his gun, at the same time giving a backward spring, to gain

the advantage of the bridge's elevation. "If you take your hands out of your pockets," he grated, "you're a dead man. Now tell where that money's hid or I'll shoot—not to kill, but to wing you for life."

I'll never forget the contempt in Giles's eyes, but he knew he faced a desperate man, and stood very still, saying, deep and scornful, "I guess you wasn't raised in this part of the United States!"

Purly was crazed by the loss of rich prospects, but even so, this stab touched him to the quick, and he muttered, "A forced promise isn't binding." Then he shouted, "Where's that money? Quick, or——" And no one doubted he would shoot.

With my ideas blown about in a tempest, I tried to gather together the threads of reason to hem them around the border with the old substantial binding of time and place—and all in a daze I started for Purly with words that must have covered another man with shame; but I think he'd have gone naked all his life before he'd have put on that garment.

"Let 'em fight it out," Buck Snaggs muttered and Doc echoed the words, jumping directly in

my path. Purly, seeing me checked, called to Giles—

"Take your choice: where's the money—or a bullet through your leg!" His eyes grew wilder —"I'll give you until I count three—and I'm counting now; and this is *one.*" He was not only desperate—he was afraid; and it's the coward with power in his hand who is most to be feared.

I hated to blacken Doc Snaggs's eye—he was, as I have said, only his brother's echo; but of course when an echo is physical and gets in the way, it must be removed by physical means. He was clinging about my middle, but I shed him like a feather, just as Purly roared—

"And this is *two,* with just one more coming!"

I stopped stock still above the prostrate form of Doc, holding my breath, knowing that if I made one move forward Purly would cry *"Three!"* and shoot down the outlaw. There was no time to form a plan. My thought-tree was heavy and sodden as if overgrown with sappy watersprouts; and as for the rest of the company, they wouldn't have interfered if they could.

With one exception—for that one was about to show us a strange thing. For just as Purly, with murder in his eye, was about to cry his fatal num-

ber, Lane Laclede, by a wonderful leap, put himself between the outlaw and danger, and stood looking at Purly just as calm and indifferent as if behind his counter, except for heavy breathing —for the jump had been the limit of his strength and skill. You'd have thought he'd always been standing right there, looking into the barrel of Purly's gun in idle curiosity. And to Giles, he said, brief and dry—"Better hide out, partner."

"Three!" yelled Purly. He couldn't have meant to shoot Laclede, yet he might have known the bullet would reach the highwayman only through Laclede's body. I suppose he didn't reason at all—just saw red and fired. And it seemed to me I had never heard so loud a report.

"Bang!" went the weapon, and *crash!* went Giles's body as he threw himself backward, heels over head. Down the embankment into the black gulf of the ravine—*splash!* into the water—then silence as long as it takes a man to draw a good breath; and when the smoke cleared away, we saw Laclede standing with his hand pressed to his heart.

Purly, thinking he was holding back the life-blood, threw down his gun with a cry of horror, but Laclede, with that sort of smile that ban-

ishes smiles from the faces of others, drawled, "You didn't touch me, old man. I was just feeling a—a sort of inward pain."

We were so relieved at finding him unhurt, but so little used to showing emotion of the softer sort, that we didn't know which way to look, and were mighty relieved when Cadwitch shouted —"To the chase, boys! We've given Giles his start, and that's all we promised."

Laclede has always been blamed by some for saving Flitterfled at the expense of the town's money, but of his critics I am not one; and I think he never cared two straws for the censure. For the sheriff had put us on our honor. And honor comes first, and after that the praise or blame of men.

As we again took up the search, finding myself with William close beside Laclede, I said, by way of showing my approval of his action, at the same time being careful not to make my praise too sweet for a strong man's appetite: "They didn't get you that time, Lanie!"

He looked into my eyes, and the moonlight showed wrinkles on his face I'd never noticed before.

"No such luck," was all he said.

XXXV

A Man Is Not Disarmed so Long as He Has a Winning Tongue

ABOUT half an hour after Flitterfled's escape, finding a chance to speak to William and Lane Laclede apart from the others, I gave them what for some time had been working in my mind. I believed the outlaw would never have been found in that skiff except to bring down provisions from some outer point to his retreat; and as this rendezvous must be upstream, I suggested that we search the hills, where Midway Creek enters Midway Forest, for traces of the "Boy Desperado." If we could capture that mysterious enemy to the town's peace, and thus cut off the bandit's food supply, we would soon have him in our net.

Rising to my idea, and praising it, as having none of their own so good, they kept close to

my heels and in no great time we had left the other searchers at a distance. In the course of an hour we reached the rough country and there found the stream unguarded, it being held impossible that Flitterfled should seek escape in a water-soaked boat by a channel hardly deep enough to keep it off the bottom. As the moon was too bright for us to hope to find our quarry in the open places, we, with due caution, began beating among the hills.

Never have I known one of my ideas to be more signally justified; for hardly had we begun to weary of the search when William gave a cry of triumph, dived into a hollow or small cave time had scooped from a hillside, and dragged forth the fugitive by a wildly resisting leg.

"I've got him," he called, and sat down upon the squirming form as cool and solid as a rock, paying no manner of attention to the groans and gasps of his prisoner.

Laclede and I ran up; and at the smothered cries of "You're killing me!" we hoisted William to his feet, for the captive was puny and without wind, a mere smooth-faced lad. To judge by his besmeared and painted face and clay-dyed hands and wrists, he was of Indian breed. But

I set him down—and so declared—as a romantic schoolboy deeply read in such adventurous books as litter my smokehouse, trying to carry out a rôle that sounds easy enough on printed page. He wore a shapeless gray hat which was bound securely to his head by a red bandana, as if he sought the picturesque, but balked at sticking feathers in his locks.

"Now," says William, after a brief breathing spell, "give an account of yourself in double quick time, or I'll use you for a cushion till the sheriff brings his handcuffs." And he gripped him by the arm till he whined from pain. "Where are you from?"

"Higginsville," he piped.

"Why did you run off from school to disguise yourself in this silly way?"

"I heard Giles Flitterfled was being starved to death."

"And what of that? What is he to you, or you to him?"

The answer came in firmer tone, and prompt enough: "I admire him—I tell you he's a brave man."

"Brave enough; but don't you know he's a robber with a price set on his head?"

The youth retorted, ready and impudent, "That price'll never have to be paid!"

"How many men are hiding with him in the woods?"

"He's all alone."

"How many are with you?"

"I'm alone, too."

"Good! Then we'll clap you in jail and see if the birds will feed him," said I, taking a part. "Lanie, you and William go get the sheriff, and while you're gone I'll keep watch over this babe-in-the-wood."

After a brief discussion as to the probable whereabouts of Cadwitch Beam and his party, Laclede struck east, advising William to try the contrary direction. But after the other was out of sight, William lingered, uneasy.

"Father, that kid is as slippery as an eel. I don't believe I'll more than get my back turned before he'll slide from between your fingers. He'll beg, and you'll let him go."

I gave him my superior laugh but he wasn't convinced.

"Get back into that hole," he ordered our prisoner, motioning toward the little cave; and as the youth hesitated, he gave him a shove that sent

him sprawling. Then to give satisfaction, I sat down before the opening, blocking it up with my notable bulk.

Still he lingered, and as his mind, relieved at sight of my durability, no longer turned on a band of practical direction, it went whirring round and round, aimless and distracting.

"Father," he said, very gloomy, "when Lane Laclede jumped between Dick Purly and Giles Flitterfled, he hoped a bullet would put an end to him. He wanted to die. There are no two ways about it—he *wanted* to die!"

I said nothing. The thing was too obvious.

He started away, after standing with his eyes on the ground—the prisoner all forgotten—and as he went I heard him say to himself in a hollow voice, "I know just how he felt."

I wasn't looking for that. The words seemed to run right through me, leaving a sort of inward bleeding, and after his footsteps in the leaves had died away, I don't know how long it was, I came to myself to find my hand doubled up and pressed against my heart.

Then I heard the prisoner's squeaky voice—"You're Stick Attum, aren't you?"

I didn't give him a syllable.

He said, plaintive, "Somebody in Higginsville thinks a lot of you!"

I gave a great start and said before I thought, "You're not Gussie Meade's son, I suppose?"

"I can't tell you who I am, it would spoil my mystery. I want to be known always as the Boy Desperado. But there's somebody in Higginsville who thinks you're just about all right." Something in his voice struck on my memory-strings, making pleasant harmony.

"You are Gussie Meade's son," I declared, and for answer got—

"I don't say I'm not, sir; but I want to stay a mystery." While I was trying to suit this new morsel to my palate, he went on:

"If you'll let me go just this once, I'll never run away from school again, or read books to make me wicked, or try to be mysterious."

"It's not to be thought of," I declared very firm. And after he had begged and begged, I was as adamant. "I can't let you go—say not another word—What would William think?"

"I'll promise by anything you please," he wheedled, "never to interfere after to-night to help Giles Flitterfled in any way. I'll admit I've been bringing him things to eat—he would row

up here every night to get the basket. But I'll never do it again, never. Stick Attum——"

"No!" I cried out as loud and sharp as a pistol-shot.

He jumped and then began to sob and moan exactly like a girl. It brought up before me the time when Gussie Meade had wept her heart out upon my bosom because Mrs. Patty would not hear to our marriage. Gussie was nothing to me now, but the memory of her girlhood was still dear, and that her son, though a weakling, should suffer at my hands was not to be borne.

"No, he didn't escape," I told William when he came with the sheriff and half a dozen men. "I gave him his parole. He's done all the harm he's going to do, and he'd better be back at school than pining away in the jail under the courthouse. Of course, if we catch him at it again, we'll show him no mercy."

"I looked for this," William remarked rather dully, as if he didn't greatly care one way or the other; and as he failed to specify what it was he had looked for, I was content to hold my peace. As for Sheriff Cadwitch Beam, he knew better than to say anything.

XXXVI

Man Has Never Understood Woman; She Was First to the Tree of Knowledge and She Picked Out the Apple for Him to Eat

IT was between two and three in the morning when, leaving William to spend the rest of the night at the margin of the woods, I tramped homeward. I hadn't been in bed for three days and nights, and I was come to an age when my elasticity was hard tried by a horse blanket on the ground; I was pretty well exhausted, too, by deep thinking, so was glad to meet not so much as a dog on the way, and to see not a light at any window, and to hear not so much as the crowing of a cock, insomuch that I had the feeling that there was nothing moving in the world except myself going through the dead moonlight.

But just as I reached the brow of the hill that

runs down past the railroad to the sawmill, I heard something that hadn't sounded in the old town for more than fifteen years; and I stopped as still as a mouse, wondering if I were in a white dream like the rest of the world. But no. I've heard hundreds of bells but none of them has the tone of the one that used to call me in at recess with the ball-game at its hottest, and I, like-enough, at the bat. What could this ringing of the College bell signify?

Without waiting longer to come to grips with the mystery with my mind, I hurried to take my body to it, feeling just then as if I could have stayed awake a thousand years. Down the slope and along the track I darted—then up the College stiles and along the walk between the maple rows to the front porch—I'd have gone right on into the house if some one sitting on the stone step hadn't started up to face me. It was Dahlia Gleason with the moonlight on her pretty, sad face and young brown hair.

The bell had by this time stopped ringing, and, a good deal eased by her calmness, I asked, doubtful, "Was there a fire?"

"Yes—yes," she said in some confusion, "it—everything's all right."

I stared at her, fanning myself with my straw hat, for I was greatly heated. "You're all dressed up," I commented. "Was it you who rang the bell, or one of the old maid sisters who live here? And did they station you on the step to keep people away? Was it a false alarm? What does it all mean, Dahlia?"

"It was—yes, it was one of them." She stood twisting her skirt between her fingers exactly as she used to do in her little-girl-days when she wanted something and was too bashful to ask for it. "*Every*thing's all right, Stick. You mustn't bother. Good-night, Stick."

"The same to you," said I, not moving a foot.

"Yes, I know it's late," she kept on twisting and untwisting her dress. "But I couldn't sleep. And it's so pleasant and peaceful out here, alone. Good-night, Stick."

"I understand you want me to go," said I, "and one of the new owners has already ordered me off the premises. But I've something to say to you, and I'll say it now."

Her face was so wan and pitiful that I forgot all about the bell. I was in the presence of something big, something that took hold of me, that dragged me out of the beaten paths of my daily

thinking. "Look here, Dahlia," I plunged into it, blind, "I've always felt like a father to you, and always shall, so speak with a father's privilege. You and Lanie love each other—marry and be happy——" And I went on to argue that neither of them would ever be happy unless they did. "There's a book in my smokehouse," said I, "that says it takes two to make one happy. That's true in your case, and in his."

"I can't talk about it," she gave me, short and breathless.

"I didn't think," I admitted, "that it would do because of—you know why. But that was just a sentiment. This is a matter of eternal truth."

"I can't talk about it——" She was very pale, but her voice was firmer.

I tried to make her see the waste that would wreck their lives if they kept apart and at last she said in a sort of cold desperation that it was mainly because of her stepdaughter—because of what Zenia would think.

"She never liked you," I said. "Before Taggart Gleason died, she made your life as miserable as she could. And you can't love her. Will you break Lanie's heart and your own for the opinion of a woman you've never respected?"

Then I told how Lane had courted death that night because he found life only a burden.

She listened with parted lips and a look in her eyes that any man might have been proud to bring there. I believe she would gladly have died with him—but she wouldn't live with him—in the main, because of what Zenia would think!

I waved my hand toward the building: "Then you prefer staying here as a housekeeper for newcomers to going out West to a big country as the wife of the man who loves you?"

She said again that she couldn't talk about it, so I gave her good-night and left, marveling how one woman will cut her life along the bias of public opinion, while another snaps her fingers at the world. And as I left the campus, something seemed to rise and inflate my chest with a wonderful sense of thrill because it had pleased nature to produce me as a man.

I had reached the street branching off to Horseshoe House when I was overtaken by several men from the woods who had been sent to inquire the meaning of the bell-ringing. "It was a scare of fire," said I, "which came to naught." They, thinking I held the facts, returned to the watchers satisfied. I, too, was well content with my ex-

planation, though, as it presently developed, the ringing of the College bell was in the nature of a signal to Giles Flitterfled, which I might have guessed had I not been satisfied over the first theory that strayed through my mind. This has been a lesson to me, advising me that no matter how plausible and water-tight a supposition may appear, if facts rest on another bottom that supposition is worth no more than the wildest flight of fancy.

XXXVII

I Have Never Been so Thrilled as When Alone with Myself, Turning Over a Wonderful Thought

BUT I soon forgot the College bell and Dahlia's sad case in thinking about William. When a man with his wedding day close at hand speaks of death as William had spoken, what could it mean but one thing? I'd been plagued by wormy doubts before, but had shed them off, spreading my leaves to a hopeful breeze. But a tree, after withstanding a hundred storms, may fall at one lightning flash; and when my son, in referring to Lane Laclede, had said, "I know just how he felt," my heart had been touched by fire.

When Horseshoe House came in sight, I was half-suffocated by a vision of my pillow, so turned toward the smokehouse to pick out a likely tale. But feeling myself to be more interesting than

any book, I roamed down the alley to the shop, feeling as strange to myself, somehow, as if meeting Stick Attum for the first time.

I was never so thrilled in my life as at that moment, just standing there alone with myself, turning over and over a wonderful thought that was spreading its wings of beauty, forever leaving behind the old shell of a doubt-grub. I was so engrossed that I never knew whether or not there came a faint sound to bring my mind to its door to look outside of itself.

At any rate, I felt the sudden need of stealth and moved with caution to the crack that had been left at the front entrance. But two-hundred-odd pounds can't poise on brittle odds and ends without a snapping, and I was overheard; for a low voice called cautiously from within—

"Father?"

At that I pushed the door wide open, and the moonlight fell upon a young lad—or so it seemed —standing near my anvil, holding by the bridle a horse built for speed—a horse I had never seen before, his eyes flashing with mettlesome spirit, his hoof stamping the ground, impatient to be off. Seeing it was not the one expected, the watcher cried out in alarm.

I said, soft and soothing, "It's only Stick Attum——" And I closed the door almost shut, just as I had found it, and tiptoed away, whispering, "Good-night, little Mystery!"

I couldn't stay there—I didn't care for home—the smokehouse had lost its charm; and of course at four in the morning all was still at Old Settlers' Bench. I didn't know what to do with myself, I was so brimming full of great thoughts.

I said to myself, "At sun-up let's go around to see Laidie!"

XXXVIII

And When I Looked at Her I Loved Her Although There Was a Broom in Her Hand

AT break of day, that is, at a little before five o'clock, I found myself before Van Buren's cottage. About an hour earlier, Sylvia had left in a carriage with her Octavius on a sort of litter, meaning to get him mended at a Kansas City hospital, thirty miles away, and for that purpose taking him in the cool of the day. Of course I had known of the plan else would I never have gone nigh the place; now, just as I had expected, I found the front gate open and the neighbor's chickens getting into the yard.

On the front porch was Laidie's grandfather, cleaned and starched, for Sylvia had kept him as thoroughly polished as was the outside of her own platter. The poor old gentleman, like a ruffled bird, was stalking about on his thin legs to get

himself wider awake. Long had it been his habit to rise at dawn and by yawnings, coughings and groans get his granddaughter astir; but to be ousted out before the stars were in was enough to make him fear a stroke.

Just then, however, I had no occasion for grandfathers, so with a nod I went right on into the cottage, finding Laidie in a little room built off to itself which, since Sylvia's coming, had gone by the name of "Library"—just that; just "Library," the only apartment so styled, to my knowledge, in Mizzouryville, unless having some other name when company was gone, such as "parlor," or the like.

Laidie stood at the window with the first tender sunbeams flickering through maple leaves to laugh on her hair—and in her hand there was a broom. She looked surprised. Well, it was early for a call, to be sure, but she was glad, as always when we met, and it suddenly struck me with wonder that I had in all confidence counted upon that very look in her eyes.

I had something of great weight to put into words, and while trying to frame the best conveyance, I made sly passes at my hair and plucked at my cuffs, as if I had fallen into B.'s methods.

The night had put such a strain on me, and what was about to happen loomed so large, that I'd thought nothing of my personal appearance; but it was brought uppermost by the sight of her sweet readiness of eye, that welcoming light that had always made her Laidie to me. And a pretty girl is better than a looking-glass to remind a man to stand straight.

"What is it, Stick?" she asked. And her voice was like the maple leaves shaking their fringed dresses for the morning dance in the sunbeams.

I forgot my hair and my cuffs—and I can't remember one word I said. Somehow I managed to pass her the idea that though I'd sought a wife for two years, Somebody's face had kept floating between my eyes and all others'—and that there was only One in the world for whom I'd give all the rest of the world—there was only One upon whom I could look with longing and unquestioning peace while she held a broom in her hand.

XXXIX

If an Inherited Tendency Breaks Out in Our Lives, It's Because We Left the Gate Open

WHEN I reached Horseshoe House it was half-past six, and William was coming up the path heavy from want of sleep and slack-nerved from a brooding brain. There was only one medicine to reach his case, so without stopping to offer useless specifics, I went on into the kitchen; and in my thought-tree the birds were singing.

In due time I set him down to a breakfast of eggs boiled to the degree of his liking, potatoes fried in long narrow strips which melted on the tongue, leaving nothing behind but a pleasing memory, piping hot cornbread as brown and tender as properly cooked fish; while in their train came a choice of strawberry preserves or real maple syrup with a glass of yellow cream—to all of which, of course, coffee, incidental.

I had never seen William so downcast as when we met at table, but he couldn't stand out against a breakfast like that, but relaxed, body and soul.

"Enjoy yourself," said I, calm, "for I don't lay to do much cooking after this morning."

He didn't ask what I meant—young folks have little curiosity as to their elders' meanings.

When he had pushed back, I said: "Let's talk awhile about the Unintended."

He turned red, then pale, then started up with "I can't. God knows it would have been better for us both if we'd never met."

"I saw her last night," I remarked, casual.

He stopped and laid down the hat he had picked up.

"And I understand," said I, "that she'll be at the College about this time. I mean to call on her—and I think she'd enjoy my call if you were alongside." I looked at him steadily and added, "I know you are to be trusted."

He knew that, too, so he didn't say anything, except "If you think I ought. . . ." Although he was a man, and felt the world's burden on his shoulders, he had much the same attitude toward me as when I used to bid him bring in wood and water. It was his instinct not only to obey, but

to trust me with responsibilities—he'd never have gone to see the Unintended if left to his own conscience, but that I should deem it proper cleared his face as no ham or cream in the world could have done.

So we went to the College without his once asking about my having seen her on the previous night—not a question from him; just a bright shining of the face. He must have felt a good deal like a condemned man who has been reprieved for one more day, a feeling, I take it, pitched low with no flags flying; true he may live this one day—but it's the morrow that hope feeds upon.

At the big front door, it was she who met us —she must have been expecting me all the while, but William's presence she had not anticipated, and was troubled thereby. I think they did not exchange more than the barest of nods, after which she looked away quickly, though I had never thought him handsomer—with his pale face and thrown-back head, he seemed grand to me.

Seeing a sofa in the hall opposite the door, I went in to sit down, motioning her to follow, and leaving William to shift for himself. Not a word did she speak, not knowing how much I had

guessed, or what William had found out—I was the only one there at ease.

"Are the old maids at home?" I asked; "and Dahlia, is she on the job?"

She murmured, reproachful, that after her parting from William, she would not have thought he'd come again.

"Father said it would be all right," William hazarded, his eyes fixed upon her with the look of a desert-traveler bidding an oasis farewell.

If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the quiet, snug satisfaction those few words gave me. He was unconscious of the compliment—had become a boy again—my boy! But not by the batting of an eyelash would I have shown my pride in him; she didn't look at him, either; at least, didn't seem to—but that may have been to let him look his fill, for though her eyes were upon the floor, I remember that she sat three-quarters toward him.

The warm June breeze came through the opening, and as I stared across the time-worn floor of the porch, and inhaled the perfume of yellow roses, I thought of the many young feet that had tripped upstairs to the chapel, or lingered on the cracked stone step; and it was for me, just for a

moment, a sad thought how those young feet had flitted through sunshine and shade, and how many years ago that had been. But though the thought was sad, like a cool shadow creeping over a sunlit meadow, it fell from a small cloud and soon passed away.

Rousing myself, I asked if she meant again to order me off her grass, at which she smiled faintly, and began to talk. On the death of her uncle, she had resolved to buy the College and live in Mizzouryville at least until William was married, so she had Jim Bob act as go-between, and she had brought along the Companion as her "sister." "I ordered you off the grass," she explained, "because I knew if you came near you'd recognize me." I laughed a little and patted her arm, admitting that until I found out who she was, the thing had rankled—and that I'd found out only the night before, from the ringing of the College bell. She tried to tell—but her voice was dulled—what an adventure it had seemed to her, living in disguise in our midst, keeping house, and all. I think nobody else ever found it adventurous to live in Mizzouryville.

William was listening in complete bewilderment, picking up what we so carelessly tossed

down. She turned to him: "I pretended, that night, to ride away from your town on the freight train; but I slipped back from the station, of course, for I was living here." Suddenly she turned as red as a rose and I fancy she was remembering how he had called her by the name in his heart. "I thought if you married at church, I'd be there. It's so strange to meet now, when everything that could be said has been said—I wanted you to think of me as riding away from you forever. Now I'll have to leave Mizzouryville in earnest, unless you promise to keep my secret, and agree never to come back."

"I'll never come again," he told her, his voice low and steady.

"No, you never, never——" And her voice broke with sudden sobs.

"And yet," said I, staring out the doorway, "he's a likely young fellow, if I do say so!"

She laughed out, and then began to cry so violently that I was frightened. It was too much for William—he just went down on his knees beside her and put his arms about her shaking shoulders.

"Here, son," said I, "take my place." And I got up.

And he took it. That boy always had minded me.

She looked up at me, the tears streaming down her face, and her cheeks as red as a sunset—a good deal redder than they would have been, likeenough, had I been at home. And she gasped out, miserable and happy, "Oh, Stick, how could you, how could you do this—and after our terrible wrench of parting! And Laidie so good, so much better suited to make a helpful wife——"

"Yes, I think with you," said I, "and that's why I mean to marry her."

William ceased to press her head to his bosom. He was paralyzed.

She fastened upon me those wonderfully keen and penetrating eyes, her lips parted, her chin slightly thrust forward. No wonder William had fallen in love with the Unintended. If her form had been fuller, and her eyes black, you couldn't have beaten her in the State of Missouri.

It was she who came first to the surface because, it may be, women do not dive so deep as men. "Stick," she cried out, her voice breaking into a million little quivers of scintillating joy, "you absolute *darling!*"

"But what did he *say?*" gasped William, look-

ing as if he feared his father had let age go to his brain. Such was the turbulence about me from the storm of emotions they had thought never to give free play, that I sat there like a rock in the spray; and the higher they were wrought up, the calmer and more judicial my speech:

"I intended for William to have Laidie as his wife because I've always meant for him to have of the world's best; and when I know what's best for him, I don't stop to ask if he wants it. But from a few words he dropped last night I learned that he'd never be happy except with the Unintended. Just as soon as I had grafted that idea on my thought-tree, everything was clear. 'Laidie may not care for me,' I told myself, 'but for years she's been a preventative to my marrying.' I'd tried to tear the feeling out of my heart, and the deeper it burned for Laidie, the more fixed I was that William should have her. But this morning I went to break the news to her that William loved another, knowing he'd never tell her, and I found that she had held to him only through a sense of duty and from thinking it my wish. And the minute I held out arms big enough to hold her, she came right into them——"

"Father!" cried William, leaping to his feet;

and, grabbing me about the middle, he gave me a man's hug. Tears were in their eyes, and such smiles on their faces as brought tears to mine. They couldn't sit still; but when they stood up, they sat down to stand up again. Stick Attum was a great man, just then! For awhile there was a deal of breathless talk and happy excitement and after we'd quieted down, a realization of the true state of affairs brought on another delirious storm of questions and explanations.

But presently, the light faded from the Unintended's face, and her lips began to quiver when she said: "And now I must tell the name that I left at home, and, oh, I wonder how much difference it'll make, when you hear it?"

I stood before them, with my arm outstretched. "Let me spare you, my dear," I said. "I'll tell your story in a few words, and as it's all unknown to William, I challenge you to watch him while I speak, and learn just what manner of man he is."

William looked from me to her in astonishment.

"When I found you in the shop last night," said I, watching her as she watched William, "I saw in a flash that you were the 'Boy Desperado'

who had so cunningly and artfully escaped me in the woods. You held a horse unknown to me, therefore brought from a distance. And when you said *"Father?"* I knew you were waiting there for the outlaw; that you were his child; and that *Flitterfled* was the name you had left at home. I asked myself how the outlaw would know when to come for the horse, and remembered the ringing of the College bell, which told me that you were the new tenant of the College. I threw my mind back into the past, and remembered that Giles Flitterfled had married one of my old schoolmates, and that he had been divorced when she learned what he was. You were ashamed to be known as Flitterfled's daughter, and, inheriting his lust of adventure, you came here to escape the looks people cast at you who knew of your origin."

"The truth killed my mother by inches," she whispered. "It made a tragedy of my girlhood; it embittered my uncle for life. Yes, that's why I couldn't tell you my name—I was ashamed."

"I'll give you a name nobody was ever ashamed of," says William, speaking like a true Attum, and making no more of what I had said (at least so far as we could see) than of the breeze in the maples.

She had drawn far away from him, but now she crept back with a pitiful little sob, saying, "I intended never to marry. I was afraid his nature might break out in me—I am so like him. But when I heard how he was being starved, I risked everything to take him food and a disguise—but not until he was about to ride away did he learn who I am. Then I told him—there at the shop door—and he broke down—and made promises. . . ."

"In my opinion," said William, "nothing breaks out in our natures unless we leave open the gate to it. Your father holds people up, while it contents you to capture hearts——"

"Just one," she protested, brightening wonderfully under his common-sense treatment of the case.

"And you love to wander——"

"But not from you—never from you!" And then she demonstrated, paying no more attention to me than if I had been the cedar tree under the south window. She went on, muffled, "Uncle was always afraid my father would discover a trace of me; that's why we lived such secluded lives. My father—you may say what you please—and I know it's dreadful, but—he's a man, all right!"

And her eyes flashed. She laughed a little shakenly at his look, then grew very still.

"Last night," said William, "when I thought you a troublesome boy, I threw you down pretty hard, I'm afraid. Did I hurt you very much?"

"It doesn't matter," she laughed. "You strained my ankle a little, so that I limp when I forget—but that's nothing."

"Which ankle?" he asked, filled with contrition; and he knelt down at her feet.

I stepped outdoors to look at the birds.

XL

"Realism" Is to Enjoy the Good Things of Life From the Money You Make by Writing Books to Show That Life Is a Vale of Tears

WELL, there's nothing duller to me than the explanations of the mysteries in the books in the smokehouse—books that have held my hands gripped to their edges through a sea of printed words. For during the voyage, with nothing between the reader and dullness save that illustrated volume, one clings to it as to a saving friend; but on making port, one wakens to the fact that the characters never lived save in the brain of some man or woman seated at his typewriter, making one hero rich and another poor by merely knocking upon the keys.

But in real life, explanations are sweet morsels on the tongue. When the Unintended became the Intended—why, that morning was one of the most

interesting that ever I drew out of time's scrap-bag.

The interest promised to last, too. When your son marries into a family that may wake up any morning to find itself in three columns on a front page, there's no cut-and-dried future in store. But Giles Flitterfled, as Giles Flitterfled, was never seen after the night he rode from my shop on the horse procured for him by the girl-out-of-the-common.

It has often hung in my thought-tree half-ripe, therefore not ready to be handed out in spoken words, that out of remorse and out of pity for his daughter, he turned over a new leaf (taking, however, his stolen booty to help him wet his finger) and that he went to a new country, and fol lowed honest and uninteresting ways, losing him self amongst the millions who do not blow themselves to fame with dynamite.

We have always been sure that the wedding present from "Unknown" came from the ex-outlaw. It was just a scrap of poetry on a bit of paper with sentiment to the effect that while "Well Wisher" was barred from being of active service to William and bride, he had the negative satisfaction of knowing that never, so long as he

lived, would he do them any harm. If "Unknown" was her father, no doubt he told himself that any present sent in the form of gold or silver or precious stone, might stir up untoward reflections upon property rights. And while not putting myself forward as a literary judge, I am persuaded that the stanzas were neither borrowed nor stolen, but honey out of his own wax; for his cunning was lost when he laid aside his gun for his pen; but the sentiment, noble.

Let it be said at this place, that it be not held to leave a bad taste in the mouth, that Octavius Selwyn no more died than have other characters such as one might wish would, but took his soul and his soul mate to more lucrative fields—for Mizzouryville was sucked as dry as a bone. We were two thousand then, but at this day—some years later—are only fifteen hundred, a third of these negroes, but more than enough whites, there being a few (but not monied men) who still cock their ears when a New Railroad is mentioned.

When William married, Dahlia Gleason went to keep house for the young couple in their city home, and has never come back even on a visit. It must be a satisfaction to her for Zenia to know she and Lane Laclede never see each other; to

her mind, it's a continuous proof of her innocence as to Taggart's death. I don't know if Lane has given up the thought of one day persuading Dahlia to be his wife, but I do know that he is the oldest-looking man for his age I ever met. However, they all look old on Old Settlers' Bench, and it isn't because the street-dust is always blowing over them, either; it's from the pure passage of years. There's old Captain Little Dave Overstreet—nobody thought he'd be living at this day; but he is, and says he aims to make his hundred.

William has kept the old College for his summer outings. Once a year he and his wife come down to spend six weeks, and there are great doings, they running into Horseshoe House at any hour (turning it upside down) and Laidie making as free over there, though no great roamer. On Sunday afternoons, we join in expeditions to the Mineral Springs and explore the arrogant weeds and impudent blackberry bushes that have overrun the "streets" and "parks" of the once-imagined "Bigger Mizzouryville." To hoist any sort of boom in our town nowadays would call for a kind of block-and-tackle not yet invented.

Sometimes I sit beside my hearth while our little boy (trained from the cradle to be orderly)

is gathering up the toys William's young hopeful has scattered from garret to cellar, while Laidie folds up the towels and papers and what not that William's wife has strewn in her wake—and the birds in my thought-tree begin singing one of nature's hymns.

It's a great old world if you have eyes for its greatness, and it'll treat you just about as well as you treat it. There are books in the smokehouse that say otherwise, but take it from Stick Attum, a rose is just as real as a mud-puddle, and funeral dirges are no truer to life than the silver chimes of a wedding anniversary.

Our little fellow is named Bill. It was my first son's name, and we have simply picked up what he laid aside. William's son is Aristarchus. He says the child was named after me, but I've never been able to find "Stick" in that wilderness of letters. Speaking of names—I've never heard William call his wife anything but some joking nickname, such as "Despy," for Desperado, or "Cereus" for night-bloomer; and when he comes seeking her, he's apt to call, "Where's that girl-out-of-the-common?" or, "Have you seen anything of Miss Wisdom?" But when they are alone, I fancy he grows tender with the name that is in

his heart. For it's just so with me—as my wife and I go walking in the fields, or down the village streets in the cool of the evening, I give her other names than "Laidie"—and Adelaide is not one of them.

THE END

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